**this is for the ones who stand**

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# this is for the ones who stand

by hujwernoo

Summary


Five stops laughing, trailing off into shuddering hiccups. Oh, he started crying sometime in the past few minutes. Klaus did not actually notice that.

“Klaus,” he says eventually.

“That’s me,” Klaus says, and, “Um,” because what do you even say to your fourteen-year-old brother you haven’t seen in seventeen years after you’ve died and spent the last six months invisibly stalking him through the apocalypse.

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Klaus and Five against the world. You'd think it wouldn't put up such a fight, being dead and all, but the ol' Academy luck is a bitch like that.


Notes

So I finally decided to make a chapter fic for this series! I'm expecting updates to be slightly idiosyncratic, but I'll aim for at least once a week, sometimes more.

- Translation into Français available: TRAD - this is for the ones who stand by Loclo4

# Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Klaus cannot, for the life of him, *ever* remember hugging Five before.

In fact, he can't remember touching Five at all, outside of sparring or shoving each other aside in training. Honestly, none of the Hargreeves were ever very cuddly, but Five actively disdained any hint of physical affection, to the point where he would teleport away if any of them got too far into his personal space.

Klaus was always the opposite. He touched his siblings as often as possible, grasping at arms and pulling on clothes and, yes, hugging them more than anyone else in the house combined. He's not sure if any of his siblings ever realized that he was making sure they were still alive, but if they did they never commented. He always kept his distance from Five, though, because when they were little - like, *really* little, so long ago he's not actually sure it happened at all - Five shouted at him that he *didn't like being touched, go away!*

So baby Four decided that Five needed to not be touched just as much as he needed to touch people, vaguely believed it was due to Five's powers, and never grasped at Five the way he did their other siblings. Which was a wise decision on little Four's part, because Five grew up to be a contender for the most stab-happy member of the Family Hargreeves (a serious accomplishment, considering Diego's power). It always made Klaus vaguely anxious to not be able to tell if Five was alive right away, but he managed. If Five didn't want hugs, he wouldn't get hugs.

Now, though, Klaus can't ever imagine letting go. Couldn't if his life depended on it, so it's a good thing he lost that a while ago, isn't it?

Five is still laughing, which is honestly getting a little concerning, but Klaus is willing to excuse that on the basis that he kind of buried Klaus' body in a hand-dug grave and went six months without speaking to anyone besides half of a store mannequin.

Being physical again is *weird.* There are rocks digging into Klaus' back, and he keeps feeling the urge to breathe even if he still doesn't need to, and he didn't realize just how cold he'd been until Five was pressed up against him. It's almost enough to distract Klaus from his brother.

Almost.

"Hey," Klaus says. His hand is cupping the back of Five's head, the other one looped around his torso. He's not holding as tight as he was when he pulled Five away from the wall, but that's only because he remembered Five needs to breathe. "Hey, Five."

Five stops laughing, trailing off into shuddering hiccups. Oh, he started crying sometime in the past few minutes. Klaus did not actually notice that.

“Klaus,” he says eventually.

“That’s me,” Klaus says, and, “Um,” because what do you even say to your fourteen-year-old brother you haven’t seen in seventeen years after you’ve died and spent the last six months invisibly stalking him through the apocalypse.

*Well, in for a penny, in for a pound,* Klaus thinks, and says, “So, I think you should get Delores a new outfit. She’s worn that shirt for four months, Five, a woman has *needs*.”

There is a very long second of silence, before Five barks out a laugh and tilts his head up enough for their eyes to meet.

“You haven’t changed,” he says, and it’s part disbelief, part humor, part wonder, and part something Klaus can’t identify.

Klaus makes an offended noise. “I have *too* changed,” he says. “I’m even better-looking now! And I have more tattoos, *and* I’m taller than you!”

“You’re still Klaus, though,” Five says, and maybe he tries to make it sound derogatory but it comes out achingly small and lost. Five *clicks* his mouth shut and sets his jaw.

He doesn’t try to disentangle from the hug, though, so Klaus counts it as a win.

Klaus sighs and looks over towards where Five nearly became even shorter than he is now. “How does that even *happen* twice,” he wonders. “Five, you have terrible luck. Never play poker.”

“Ah,” Five says, and wait, does he look *guilty?* “About that.”

Several pieces slot together in Klaus’ mind, and he looks from Five to the collapsed wall, and back again. “Wha- *Five, you* ***fucking idiot.”***

“You weren’t materializing!” Five protests instantly, because this family can’t go two minutes without devolving into an argument. Five props himself up, and if Klaus needed to breathe anymore Five’s elbows would be doing a great job of impeding that. “It’s been days, and I wasn’t getting anywhere with the calculations, and you appeared when I was in danger last time -”

“I was *trying!*” Klaus says, because he fucking was, okay, he’s been trying so hard to bring back that glow in his hands that he could probably write the definitive guidebook on How To Fail At Becoming Corporeal. “I nearly figured it out when you decided to throw a tantrum and give me *another* heart attack -”

“You’re dead, you don’t have a heart anymore,” Five interrupts, and to his credit he barely stumbles over the first two words.

“Which just goes to show that your ability to be an annoying little shit can *transcend reality!*” Klaus throws up his hands in despair. Then returns to hugging Five, because like fuck is he letting him go. He’d probably go jump off a bridge or something. “I swear, Five, I - oh fuck.”

Klaus' vision swims a bit for a second, and he realizes very abruptly how long he's been corporeal.

"Klaus?" Five asks sharply.

"Think that's all I have for today, little bro," Klaus manages. "Please don't try to squish yourself a third time, I'll come back, I swear, I just…."

And then Five thumps through Klaus' torso to hit the ground. Klaus rolls out of the way and grimaces at his reforming body. It's sharper than it usually is, more of a stabbing, freezing feeling than fizzy and distant. He's had worse, of course, even before he ended up on the streets, but it's *unfamiliar* in a way that's just plain unsettling.

Five hisses as his wrist hits the ground, and curls in on himself, shifting to put his leg and wrist in a less strained position. He stays like that for several seconds.

Then, carefully, he gets up.

When Klaus sees his face again, it's back to his preferred aloof expression. The way his eyes flicker over his surroundings, however, are not. Even though Klaus has grown used to it, when his eyes skip over Klaus lying on the ground there's an abrupt pain in his chest.

Five takes a deep breath. "I'm assuming," he says, eyes still roaming around, "that you can still hear me. I'm - going back to base now."

"Your fort," Klaus corrects, rubbing at where Five phased through him.

"I'm -" Five stutters to a stop, which has never happened before that Klaus can remember. "You - I -" Five scowls, almost certainly at himself.

"It's okay," Klaus says, quietly. "It's okay, Five, I know."

And he does. He really, really does. After all, it's what he wanted to say, when he saw that Five was still alive, half a year ago. What he regretted never saying before, for seventeen years.

"I'll get Delores a new shirt," Five finally says.

Klaus feels his lips curve into a smile. "Well," he says. "About time."

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell I love writing these two goobers, because I really do.

# Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes five and a half days for Klaus to reappear.

Five does not sit around waiting for him. He still has that ever-pressing problem of survival, and despite gaining enough food to last for two weeks there is still a list as long as his arm to do. His leg and wrist don't magically heal, either, so it's slow going. Five makes two more scavenging trips, until the first snowfall of the year forces him into his winter shelter.

It is an unwelcome shock. Winter has come, and he barely has any food supplies. He's been so focused on shelter and medical supplies that he completely skipped over food. It's the kind of oversight that is uncomfortably reminiscent of how Five ended up in the apocalypse in the first place, which is a thought that makes Five want to stab something.

He now has enough food for three weeks, four if he stretches it. Five alternates between cursing at the supplies and at himself, all the while pacing back and forth and cursing about *that* because he's wasting valuable calories.

"Calm down, calm down," Five mutters to himself. Okay, so he has to stockpile several more months of food in the next few days, when finding a single week's worth of food is a rare find now. His leg still isn't completely okay, the snow isn't stopping, and Klaus hasn't reappeared.

Five forces himself to sit down and take the weight off his leg. He tries breathing deeply, but that crap has never really worked on him. Instead, he grabs the nearest chalkboard and starts writing figures, because that won't really help his mood but it might distract him a little.

He refuses to feel guilty for forcing Klaus' hand with the wall, although he burns with shame to remember how he lost his temper and made the engineered danger exponentially worse. Reacting childishly is something Reginald has scolded him for several times in the past, and the thought of proving that *miserable fucking bastard* ***right*** is enough to make Five resolve to become the most mature person on the fucking *planet.*

Considering there's a very good chance the only other person on the planet is *Klaus,* that kind of cuts the legs out from under the point Five is trying to make, but whatever.

Five erases a string of numbers with a scowl. He needs to figure out the intricacies of space-time, but that's coming along even slower than his healing leg. He now has more data, from Klaus' second appearance, but it's not nearly enough.

For the who-knows-how-many time, Five finds himself staring off into the distance, remembering just how it felt to have Klaus' arms around him. Five has always *hated* physical contact, but that was before he buried his family and spent six months completely alone. He never thought that he could gain comfort from Klaus, of all people (his favorite was always

Vanya, with Ben as a close second), but he's learned a lot of things in the past several months that would have utterly floored him before.

Klaus being real is - something Five is never going to describe out loud, but he suspects Klaus already knows. He would call it relief, except that's not quite deep enough. He refuses to think about it for any length of time, because then his mind starts to come up with ridiculous words like *rescue* or *salvation,* and he does not need to be mocked by his now-older brother for the rest of however-long-it-takes-to-get-back.

Five marks down a new equation, and even if it's only related to time travel through four layers of tangentiality, he's pleased to see that it's almost certainly correct. One step closer to figuring this whole thing out.

But he can't forget to plan for the short-term, however better suited he is to the long-term problem of getting home. Surviving long enough to do that has to come first. Five flips over the board and sketches out a rough map of the city.

He's already scavenged everything in a five-mile radius, so it might be time to start planning out multi-day trips. Five calculates that his teleportation should be back to normal by spring, and there are entire other cities waiting to be mined for supplies, so all he has to focus on is surviving the winter.

Five breathes out heavily and looks at the map again. He marks out the places where he's found food before - he has a master map a few rooms over, but he doesn't feel like moving right now, and he can remember it well enough - and makes notes about the possibility that he missed something the first time around. There's one supermarket that he searched very early on, before he had an organized approach, where it's possible he skipped over something -

"Over there," Klaus says, pointing.

Five does *not* yelp and fall off the chair. That would be undignified.

"Oh, I'm going to *enjoy* this," Klaus says delightedly. He bounces on his heels, hands clasped behind his back.

"Fuck you," Five shoots back on reflex. He grits his teeth and pulls himself up, grabbing the map from where it clattered to the floor. He can't stop himself from staring at Klaus, however, which is something he'll have to work on later but can't bring himself to care about right now.

The first two times Five saw Klaus appear, he was too busy reeling to take in the little details. But now the shock has worn off, and Five catalogues everything he can take note of.

Klaus looks almost identical to when he died, which Five doesn't like remembering. There are a few subtle differences, though, which he's grateful for. This Klaus doesn't have a trace of blood on him, and none of his clothes are torn. There's also the presence of a wide smile on his face, head bobbing with glee, eyes sharp and bright instead of glazed and staring.

Five is suddenly, abruptly glad that no one in this family ever expresses anything close to positive emotions towards each other. He'd probably break down sobbing if he was one iota less practiced at deflection.

"How long can you stay corporeal this time?" he asks instead, because that's something he needs to know upfront.

"I'm not actually corporeal!" Klaus waves his hand through the wall as a demonstration. "I figured that unless you're going to throw yourself off a bridge this time, I only needed to let you see and hear me, and that takes way less energy. I think I can stay for an hour or two? Not *completely* sure, but around there."

"An hour," Five repeats. "That's - excellent. Good work."

Klaus drops his hand and *flickers,* and Five stiffens. Klaus frowns at himself and closes his eyes, before stabilizing. He opens his eyes and looks, bewildered, at Five. "Did you just *compliment* me?"

"No," Five says.

"You *did!*" Klaus claps his hands to his face, expression rapturous. "Fivey, I didn't know you could *do* that!"

"I *didn't,*" Five snaps, and because he knows it will devolve into an endless spiral of childish repetition if he doesn't, he changes the subject. "What were you saying when you first appeared?"

Klaus shoots him a look that says he will *not* be forgetting Five's slip of the tongue any time soon, and moves over to point a finger at a place on the map. "There's a stash you missed there, in the blue house. They had an entire pantry of canned stuff in the basement, and I think they went to Costco or something right before the apocalypse, because it is *stuffed,* let me tell you."

Five stares at the map, and then at Klaus.

"Tell me more," he orders, and picks up the chalk.

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"- and that's all the stuff I can remember." Klaus finishes twenty minutes later, dropping his hand.

Five stares at the map of the city hung on his bedroom wall, pen hanging from his fingers. There is barely a single block without a new mark on it - X for food or liquids, O for medical supplies, checks for miscellaneous things. There's enough to last him a year or more in total comfort, if Klaus is telling the truth.

Looking at it, Five feels distant from himself, slightly unreal. Like if he makes any move, this moment will pop like a soap bubble and he'll wake up in his bed to see the previous, mostly-unmarked map hanging across from him.

“Five?” Klaus says hesitantly.

Five swallows. Then he swallows again. “Good,” he manages to get out. “This is. Good. Thank you, Klaus.”

“Well,” Klaus says after a brief pause. “I wanted to be useful. Didn’t think I’d ever get to tell you about any of this stuff, but I kept track all the same.”

“I’m glad.” Five says, and sits on his bed. He manages to tear his eyes away from the map to focus on his brother. “I’ll go and collect supplies from the closer locations once it stops snowing. I should be able to gather enough to last the winter over the next week.”

From the way Klaus eyes Five’s leg, he’s not entirely happy about that decision, but he lets it go. He must realize the grim reality of winter can’t be put on hold for something so insignificant as a broken leg. Five has already worked out which locations he’ll be visiting in what order, and the only concession he’s made to his current condition is planning to take a couple of painkillers beforehand.

“Now,” Five says, and folds his hands in his lap to prevent them from shaking. “For more long-term plans.”

Klaus frowns. “Like what?”

Five takes a deep breath, and lets it out. “Klaus,” he says steadily. “What caused the apocalypse?”

Klaus pauses. “Ah,” he says. “That.”

Five swallows. “Yes. What was it?”

Klaus chews on his lip and winces. “That’s kind of the problem,” he says. “I don’t actually know.”

Five stares.

*“What?”*

Chapter End Notes

How do you make it so the chapter 1 end notes don't appear later, I am completely lost here.

# Chapter 3

"What do you mean *you don't know?* You were *there!*"

Klaus winces again. Abruptly, he's glad that he didn't figure out how to go fully corporeal for any length of time, because Five looks like he would totally kill Klaus all over again if he could.

"Yeah," Klaus says slowly. "I was, but I don't remember much. I mean, there was a lot of yelling, and some sort of -" *white* "- bright light? But that's all I know."

Five looks both disbelieving and pissed beyond measure. "*How,*" he hisses, "Can you not remember the cause of the *apocalypse?*"

"....Do you actually want me to answer that?" Klaus checks, because Five used to love tripping them up with rhetorical questions like that.

*"Yes,"* Five bites out.

"Well, for one, I was high as a kite," Klaus says, because he's pretty sure Five is smart enough to figure out that his addictions only increased in their seventeen years of separation. "And two, it's not like anyone trusts *me* with anything important. I barely even knew why we stuck around the house after the funeral. Luther was all gung-ho about the whole 'murder' angle, but he was literally the only person who gave a shit, so."

"Funeral?" Five asked sharply. "Murder?"

"Oh," Klaus realizes. "Right. So, the reason we were all at the Academy even though we were all avoiding each other for a good decade before that is because dear old Dad finally kicked the bucket. Brought us all back together for the funeral, yay," Klaus does jazz hands. "And Luther was convinced someone killed him, with the underlying but pointed subtext that one of *us* killed him, but even if that's true, who cares, seriously." Klaus sighs. "And then a few days later the world ended, so the whole thing is now moot."

Five nods slowly. "You said you remember a light?" he prompts. He seems calmer now, or maybe just preoccupied with working out a new puzzle.

Klaus twitches. It's almost impossible not to remember the light, the cold, brilliant whiteness of it searing into his very soul. It's the last thing he remembers before dying, and he knows, without knowing how he knows, that he'll remember it perfectly for the rest of his existence.

"....Yeah," he says. "It was….everything."

"Everything? What do you mean?" Five asks with interest.

Klaus means that it was *everything.* Blazing, enormous *white* that blotted out the world, dwarfed the sun, outshone the universe. So bright he's half-wondered if it was an angel come

down to Earth, one of those Old Testament-style ones bursting with divine light to scour away all the sins it could find. So *much* that nothing else mattered - not him, not his siblings, not anyone else in the whole damn world combined could come close. The other side of the planet wasn't far away enough, he knows, not when it came to the *white.*

"Just -" Klaus takes in a ragged breath, because even if he's been dead for six months he still has thirty years of being alive, and breathing is a hard habit to shake. "- Later. I promise, later, but not now, okay?"

Five *almost* keeps pushing, Klaus can see it, but something in his tone must convince Five, because he drops it. Though his eyes say he won't forget Klaus' promise of *later.*

"So the old man finally died," Five muses instead. "Wish I could have been there."

"Heart attack," Klaus supplies. "Well, if you believe Mom, Pogo, the coroner, and the police. Luther was still pretty convinced of the murder thing. Something about his monocle, I wasn't paying attention."

Five taps his fingers against his leg. "I don't see what Reginald's death could have to do with the apocalypse," he says after a moment, "but the timing is somewhat suspicious. I'll consider it a tentative clue for now."

"You think Luther was right?" Klaus asks, surprised.

"I don't know what to think right now," Five corrects. "But I can't go discarding data, even if it later proves irrelevant. So, I assume you also know nothing about the eye?"

"Not a thing," Klaus says. "Except that it's really creepy when you take it out and stare at it for hours."

"I'm *meditating,*" Five snaps before regaining control of himself. "What do you remember about the day of the apocalypse?"

"....Not much?" Klaus says vaguely. "Uh, Luther was in a snit about something, Diego was even more stabby than usual, Ben was harping on -"

Klaus abruptly cuts himself off, because he *knows* how his siblings get when he mentions Ben. It's always accusations and anger and he does *not* feel like dealing with that right now. He knows he's not the most reliable person in the world, but *surely* they know he wouldn't lie about Ben? Except apparently they don't, and no, he's not bitter about that at all, why would you ask?

But Five doesn't get angry. He doesn't hit, or shout, or so much as glare. Instead he leans forward and prompts "What was Ben talking about?" like that is in any way a normal response to -

Oh.

He doesn't know.

Klaus feels a swooping sensation in his gut, like his organs just went into freefall. He stares at Five, his little brother who is seventeen years out of date on what's been going on in their family. Like the fact that his favorite brother - everyone's favorite brother, really - died just a few years after he left.

"Um," Klaus trips over his tongue. "Just - just drugs, you know, telling me to get sober, that stuff."

Five raises an eyebrow, and for a second Klaus thinks he blew it, that Five is going to figure it all out and accuse him of lying, wanting attention, using Ben *like you always do, Klaus, what the fuck is* ***wrong*** *with you -*

But all he says, dryly, is, "I agree with him. It would have been helpful if you were actually sober enough to remember the lead-up to the most important event in history."

And Klaus kind of wants to cry, because just hearing that easy acknowledgement that of course Ben was there, if Klaus says he's there then he *was,* is something he's wanted to hear for *years.* It doesn't even matter that Five doesn't know Ben died, or that he's going to *lose it* when he finally learns the truth - all Klaus can think about is how he wishes Ben were here right now, to hear a single one of their siblings say that yes, he exists.

"Right," he says, and he must come off as slightly hysterical because Five frowns at him, so he hurries on before any awkward questions can be asked. "So most of the day is a blur, really, and I can't really tell you anything that actually happened for certain. Like, I thought Vanya was there, near the end? But you didn't, uh, find her, so I guess she wasn't."

Five sighs, and rubs his face with his uninjured hand. He starts to say something, but stops. Klaus is pretty sure that it's something that would prove that Five actually has human emotions like caring about other people, and thus Five deemed it unsuitable to exit his mouth.

Instead, Five pulls out the Eye. Klaus has been capitalizing it in his head for a while now, because Five is probably right about it belonging to whoever caused the apocalypse, and any part of anyone who can create the *white* deserves capital letters.

"So you really don't know anything," Five muses, more to himself than to Klaus.

Klaus tries, and mostly fails, not to let the words get to him. He knows he's a fuckup, okay, he's been told that and worse every day of his life. *Idiot* and *junkie* and *useless* are all a familiar refrain, and honestly he can't even really disagree with them. It's not like he's ever actually tried to prove otherwise. So he can't get upset when his last living relative throws it out like he never expected differently.

"Yup," Klaus says, with a nonchalance he's gotten very good at faking. "Sorry to disappoint, brother mine, if I'd known the world was going to end, I'd have - well, actually, I probably would've grabbed every drug I could find. Go out with *style,* you know?"

"Only you would consider that *style,*" Five snorts. He holds up the Eye. "I suppose I'll have to look for wherever Meritech's headquarters are. I hope there are at least a few intact records."

Five does not sound hopeful about this, and Klaus is inclined to agree. Searching for one building in an entire city - hell, maybe an entire *country,* Klaus realizes, since there's no guarantee it came from *here* - in the hopes that a record of a specific patient survived the literal apocalypse is….kind of the definition of a long shot.

Still, it's the best shot they have until Five figures out time travel, unless Klaus' memory magically clears up. Which, considering he can't even remember the name of the drug(s) he took that morning, is even less likely than finding Meritech.

"Well, I can do the 'looking' part," Klaus volunteers. "It'll be just like old times." And isn't that ironic, that after years of being annoyed at getting relegated to 'lookout' position he willingly takes it on for who-knows-how-long. But it's clearly better than Five doing it, what with him being all tiny and squishy and breakable.

Five's eyes flicker up, surprised. "That - you *would* make a good scout," he says slowly, glancing at the newly-marked map.

"I know," Klaus preens, and wow, maybe this is why his siblings all liked being the best, because he knows addictions and he's pretty sure he's getting addicted to praise.

"Huh," Five says, staring between Klaus and the map. "Right. I can work with this."

"Glad to hear it," Klaus says, and then notices the slight strain it's taking to stay visible. "Uh, I think I'm running low on," he waves a hand, "energy stuff."

"Go back to default," Five instructs. "Reappear once you can stay for another hour or so, I need to work out scouting plans."

"Aye-aye, Captain," Klaus says, and throws a probably-inaccurate salute. Whatever, there's no one around to correct him anymore. He loosens the feeling in his chest, the thrumming power underneath his not-skin sinking back down to nestle in his not-bones. He can tell when he fades from view when Five glances up and skates over where he's standing without a pause.

Klaus wanders off, leaving Five to his nerd stuff. He can't *wait* to tell Delores what happened today.

# Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five works feverishly for hours, coming up with idea after idea to make use of an intangible, unhurtable scout with no physical needs or regard for the current laws of physics. He makes a list of experiments to try out, to figure what kind of limits Klaus has. Can he walk on water? Can he see in the dark? Can he stay corporeal long enough to carry things? He's appeared standing on the ground every time, but there's no reason in principle for that to be a hard limit. He's a *ghost,* floating should be the least of what he can do.

Finding the stashes Five missed is only the start of it. Klaus can check buildings for stability, search for any survivors, visit other continents, assist in construction and farming, protect Five, work in any kind of weather, and, perhaps best of all, won't consume any resources in return.

Five sits back, slightly dazed. The sheer *possibilities* are dizzying. Surviving the apocalypse was always doable, but with only a very slim margin of error. With Klaus, that margin just got *significantly* larger.

"Klaus," he says, on the off-chance his brother has decided to stick around. "For once, your powers are actually *useful.*"

Klaus doesn't pop into visibility and offer an asinine remark he thinks is witty, so Five assumes he's wandering around somewhere in the base. That or he went outside, which he can do without fear or protective clothing because he's a *ghost.*

For a brief, wild moment, Five finds himself *jealous* of Klaus, which is not a collection of words he ever expected to think in that order with any sincerity. Five has never once thought that he would prefer any of his siblings' powers to his own. Strength is too brutish, telekinetic accuracy is useful but drab, rumors are too easy to disable, tentacles are too uncontrolled. And seeing the dead is just plain *useless.*

Not here, however, and Five is still kicking himself for not exploring Klaus' powers more. He gives himself a pass for not thinking of this *exact* situation, because he really couldn't have predicted Klaus to be able to functionally come back from the dead, but he should have realized that his powers are more than they first appeared to be. Klaus was always the odd one out in terms of powers - they only affected him, they had no combat application, they were really absurdly limited in general. But now there is an entire world where Klaus' abilities are allowed to shine, and turns out there's more to them than anyone ever expected. Five wrestles with himself before admitting that yes, he *is* jealous of Klaus.

Although not to the point where he'd *actually* switch powers, given the option. Five has dedicated his life to honing his powers and considers them to be more than adequate, thank you very much. If a genuinely superior power came along and he could switch - well, he'd

have trouble with the decision. Space-jumping is *his* in a way he can't quite explain, and he wouldn't really be *Five* without it.

Five has briefly wondered if his siblings feel the same way about their own powers, but he's never figured out the right way to ask them. It's not like he's personally *close* with One through Four, no matter how fiercely he loves them, and of the remaining two he can't ask Vanya and it would be incredibly inappropriate to ask Ben about the Horror, considering Ben's feelings about the subject.

(A small voice inside him points out he's still using the present tense when thinking about his siblings. He ignores it.)

But back to the matter at hand. Five fiddles with the chalk and looks over his lists. It's not enough, not nearly enough, but it's a good start. He thinks he did rather well at staying focused, considering his eyes keep gravitating to the map and his injuries are aching and he keeps remembering with a little jolt every few seconds that Klaus is here, he's real, Five isn't alone anymore.

Five sets aside his lists carefully, and hobbles out of his bedroom. The library basement is almost completely intact, and after clearing out the bodies and some shoring up here and there, it's become a sturdy winter shelter. Most of the rooms are storage for supplies and his actual *living* space is only two rooms, and he's gathered a large number of lanterns and candles for the entirely literal dark days ahead, but he judges the shelter perfectly adequate for weathering the winter.

As long as he can get to the food caches Klaus pointed out, anyways.

Five makes the rounds of checking on his supplies again - it's become something of a nightly ritual. It sets his mind at ease, to go to sleep knowing everything is accounted for and in its proper place. Medical room, check. Wine cellar, check. Quantum theory workroom, check. Back door connecting to a makeshift outhouse, check. Miscellaneous supply room, check. Pantry, check. Front entrance snugly barred, check. Common room with Delores perched on a comfy armchair, check. Bedroom, check.

Five wonders where Klaus is. Is he out in the snow, enjoying the view he's never been able to appreciate before without multiple layers in the way? Is he following Five around the base, providing unheard commentary? Is he sitting next to Delores, telling her how fabulous she looks in her new green cashmere sweater?

It's no use speculating. Klaus will reappear when he's able to, and no doubt Five will be regaled with every adventure he's had since they parted and a few more thrown in for good measure. Klaus may have changed physically, but there's no doubt he's still the annoying idiot Five remembers.

Five refuses to acknowledge that he feels comforted by that. In a world gone mad, it's the one thing that's stayed the same, but that doesn't mean he has to get *sentimental* about it.

Trudging into his bedroom, Five looks speculatively at the solar-powered space heater shoved next to the bed. It was a very fortunate find, and he's looking forward to having it in

the dead of winter.

This is not the dead of winter, however, so he decides against using it tonight. Five doesn't bother changing into pajamas, instead just falling onto the bed.

*After everything that's happened today, I'm not sure I can fall asleep,* is the last thing he remembers thinking, before everything is washed away by a tide of darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Totally not filler. Nope. Not at all.

# Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

*sees that chapter 4 is narrated by Five and chapter 5 is narrated by Klaus*

"….that was on purpose."

Klaus follows Five through the wasteland and watches him find another cache of food. This one isn't so large, maybe a couple days worth, but Five still lights up when he sees it. Well, the line above his eyes goes away and there's a slight upwards tic to his mouth, which amounts to the same thing.

The wagon has been traded in for a larger model, one big enough to carry roughly four weeks of food. It's a sign of changing times, and Klaus is proud to say that he brought about the catalyst. It's only been a little more than two days since he appeared on purpose for the first time, and Five has already gone out and brought back an entire wagonful of supplies. Klaus doesn't really go into his brother's bedroom often, because it's kind of weird when he's invisible, but one time he came in and Five was looking at the marked-up map with an expression that was dangerously close to tears. Klaus hightailed it out of there and plans to bring it up *never,* but it prompted him to go out scouting for more supplies, and he has a few more locations for Five all ready to go.

So yeah, he's feeling pretty smug with himself right now.

Especially since he's fairly certain he's recovered enough to appear again. Klaus checks the feeling in his chest, and is reassured by the pool of energy there. It's not something he can definitively put measurements to (which he knows is going to drive Five crazy once they start discussing the specifics of his powers), but it's definitely as large as it was when he made himself visible on purpose.

So Klaus waits until Five is finished clearing out the location of food, and then pulls on the energy, feels it spread through his limbs, adds a little extra to where his vocal cords would be if he still had them, and metaphorically flicks a switch -

"Miss me?" he says brightly.

Five only jumps a little - he'll have to work on that, he has a feeling Five will get inured to Klaus' sudden appearances very fast. As much as he will treasure the memory of Five falling out of his chair, he wants to milk this as much as he can.

"Klaus," Five says, and pointedly avoids answering Klaus' question. "Is this length of time between visits going to be normal?"

“Beats me,” Klaus shrugs. “Took this long to feel like I can stay another hour. It might improve with time. And you know I’m always here, right? It’s not exactly ‘visiting’ for me.”

“It is from my point of view,” Five says. Then, “Why did you direct me to that drugstore? I already found everything useful.”

“Au contraire, mon frere,” Klaus says airily. “You entirely overlooked their supply of deodorant, which you desperately need after six months without a shower. Also, there was some makeup I thought Delores might like.”

Five glares at Klaus. “It’s not like I can just turn on a faucet,” he snaps. “I’ve kept myself clean.”

“With cleaning wipes,” Klaus protests. “Which, by the way, aren’t meant to be used on human skin. Just get a bucket and use snow or rainwater from now on, and I’m sure you can snatch a few towels from somewhere. And grab a few lice shampoos while you’re at it, better safe than sorry.”

Five blinks. “Are - are you trying to *parent* me?”

Klaus can’t help it - he breaks down laughing. “*No,*” he wheezes, and feels his control of the energy flicker. He grabs hold of it and anchors it again, feels it stabilize. “No,” he repeats, still giggling. “Definitely not. Just passing on a few tips.”

“Because you’re so knowledgeable about post-apocalyptic survival,” Five snarks.

Klaus shrugs. “It’s sort of like living on the streets, if you look at it sideways. Except there’s no one to arrest you if you steal shit.”

He’s trivializing what Five is going through, he knows, but that’s what he does - deflect, de-emphasize, deny. Five has never appreciated Klaus’ sense of humor, but now that it’s just them Klaus plans to bombard his brother with it until he breaks down and enjoys it. Now that Klaus is free from any reprisal, he’s actually looking forward to seeing how much he can needle his brother until he fine-tunes it enough to get a laugh. God knows Five needs it.

“You lived on the streets?”

There’s an odd note in Five’s voice, but Klaus doesn’t think about it overmuch. “Sure,” he says easily. “I left a few months after -” after Ben died, but Five doesn’t know about that and he stumbles, “- after we turned seventeen, never looked back.”

“How long?” Five asks.

“Hm?” Klaus blinks at him.

“How long did you live on the streets?” Five elaborates.

Klaus stares at him. “Uh,” he says. “I never stopped? Or, well, I guess I stayed at the Academy after Dad died, but like fuck was *that* going to last. And there was that guy I stayed with for a few weeks. He made *fantastic* osso bucco.”

It's also the only vaguely healthy relationship Klaus has ever been in. Too bad the guy's fiance had come back from his overseas trip early and caught them together. Klaus managed to get away with only a single black eye and a pair of ringing ears, which he counts as lucky. Being the side dish is all too often a very dangerous position, given the people Klaus is used to associating with.

Five remains silent. Klaus peers at him. "Five?"

"Thirteen years?" he asks, and wow he's standing really still for some reason. Klaus has to dig through his memory to remember what it means to see Five looking like that. It's the way Five stands when he's actually angry about something, not just frustrated or annoyed. Tense and sharp and poised to explode. "You were homeless for thirteen years?"

"....Yeah?" Klaus says uncertainly. He's not really sure what Five is upset about, because honestly, it's not like anyone didn't see that coming.

"No one let you stay with them?"

"Nah, Diego said I would have stolen everything and run for it," Klaus laughs. "Which is probably true. He shoved me into rehab a couple times, but it is *shockingly* easy to smuggle drugs into there, you wouldn't believe it."

Five is silent again. Klaus can't tell what he's thinking, and it's kind of alarming and reassuring at the same time. Alarming because he's grown used to being able to read Five's mood over the past six months, thanks to being able to observe Five whenever he wants and mostly without Five's knowledge. Reassuring because the Five he remembers was always fairly inscrutable, and seeing him return to that state sends a pang of nostalgia through Klaus.

"I see," Five says at last, although what he sees Klaus has no idea. Then, "So, snow or rainwater."

"Yep!" Klaus says brightly. "There's a stack of buckets in the store you're going to next, I think you could find space for a couple…."

**********

Klaus looks over at Five and feels a frown cross his face. They're back at Five's fort now, Klaus returning to invisibility hours ago, and even though the pantry is close to full Five hasn't been acting as wildly ecstatic as Klaus would have predicted. Sure, the painkillers have worn off and Five is paying for an entire day of activity, but it feels like more than that.

He did pick up that makeup for Delores, though, and is currently applying eyeshadow. Klaus has to admit that even though Delores is just inherently kind of creepy, she's kind of grown on him. And besides, he of all people can deal with a little bit of creepy. At least she isn't dripping blood and guts or sporting mangled, sloughed-off skin. Under that light, she's practically the Venus de Milo.

Even moreso, now that Five is done with the eyeshadow. Klaus assured him that this shade would make her eyes really pop, but he didn't expect her to look this stunning. He tells her

so, and imagines the purr she gives in return. *'Such a gentleman, and quite the discerning eye,'* she tells him, and he grins at her.

"You should go into makeup artistry," Klaus tells Five, because doing that with a still-splinted wrist is honestly impressive. Klaus knows how difficult that is from personal experience.

Five sighs, almost as if he heard the comment, and Klaus has to check if he accidentally made himself visible. But nope, still ghostly as ever.

Five leans back in his chair, and Klaus leans forwards, because Five looks….upset? Klaus isn't sure. He's willing to bet that only Vanya has ever seen Five genuinely upset, and on second thought he's not so sure he'd take that bet. Klaus has seen him bawl his eyes out and stay nearly catatonic for two days afterwards, of course, but he doesn't really count that because that was actually showing some seriously impressive control, considering the situation.

Then Five shakes himself and his face goes back to his default bitchface. He gets up gingerly, says a quiet goodnight to Delores and Klaus himself, which causes Klaus to do a double-take, and goes to bed.

Klaus stands uncertainly in the middle of the room, feeling like he's missed something very important.

# Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once the snow really sets in, Five hunkers down in the base and doesn't go out more than necessary. This might have given him the condition known as 'cabin fever', were he anything other than a Hargreeves who wasn't allowed out of the house for his first decade of life. Five is not the person in his family most used to being restricted in his travel options, but he can certainly wait out a few months in a well-stocked and moderately spacious bunker.

Five develops a routine. He wakes up at seven, like he always does, like everyone in the Academy was trained to. He'll probably wake up at seven for the rest of his life. He eats breakfast, which he thought was a waste of time until Klaus badgered him into considering otherwise. If Five gives himself food right away, he'll be at full capacity for most of the day, and he can get away with a moderate-to-small-sized lunch and a very light dinner or even none at all, because he can't feel hunger when he's asleep.

Five doesn't ask how Klaus is so knowledgeable about rationing his food like that.

After breakfast, Five gathers snow and puts it aside to melt. While he's outside, he sets out the heater to recharge. Then he loses himself in his workroom for several hours, until he eventually, maybe remembers it's time to eat. He does so, usually scarfing it down while scribbling out equations between bites. Five rarely leaves his workroom before two or three, according to his internal clock, which is usually when he grows too frustrated to continue.

Then he uses the melted snow to wash himself, and make use of that lice shampoo he picked up at Klaus' urging. Afterwards he'll retire to the common room, where he talks with Delores about whatever topic comes to mind - it ends up being theoretical physics more often than not, but sometimes it swings into areas she likes, like fashion and history.

Increasingly, Klaus manages to join them around this time. He's getting better at using his powers, and he can become visible and audible for maybe twenty minutes a day now. That is, if he doesn't use up time appearing beforehand to remind Five to eat lunch. Five charts every single appearance and notes that Klaus should be able to manifest for at least half the time in about a year or so.

Once Five is tired of talking to Delores, he eats dinner, reviews his work with a fresh eye and ends up throwing half of it out, and does miscellaneous chores until ten or eleven. Then he brings in the heater, flips it on, checks off another box on the calendar, and goes to bed.

Five maybe thinks about risking one of his jumps to go over to the Academy to look at his siblings' graves, every so often. He tries to push the thought from his mind, but it keeps coming back. He's not entirely sure why. He knows what the scene looks like. He's the one who made it. There is no reason at all for him to feel the creeping urge to go there and stare at them for hours, the same way he sometimes gets lost staring at the eye.

Klaus uses too much of his time when he appears to snap Five out of thinking about it. Five doesn't know how Klaus can tell when he starts falling into a spiral, but he does, every time. It's a wasteful and pointless use of Klaus' very limited time in the physical world, but every time Five tries to argue this the words turn to ash on his tongue.

So Klaus keeps doing it, once even manifesting himself to full corporeality to smack Five around the head when he doesn't look away from the eye at Klaus' urging. It turns out to be the wrong decision when Five retaliates on instinct and they spend a minute grappling until Klaus dissolves under Five's hands, and then it's three days before Klaus can come back. Five spends that time neglecting his other responsibilities to lock himself in his workroom, writing out equations until he collapses from exhaustion and eating a grand total of one and a half meals. He thinks he's doing it to make a point to Klaus, but he's not going to admit that he forgot what the exact point was.

Klaus reappears on the fourth day (of course he does, he's Number Four). Five might be slightly out of it by then, and it takes nearly fifteen minutes for Klaus to talk him through going to the pantry and getting something to eat. He even makes Five open two of the limited bottles of water instead of a wine bottle, because Five is somewhat dehydrated.

Once Five is recovered, which takes most of another day, Klaus tears into him for neglecting himself so badly and they have a screaming match that doesn't even end when Klaus' time runs out, and Five shouts himself hoarse for another ten minutes and imagines Klaus doing the same.

The next day they don't speak about it at all. Five doesn't talk about the things he called Klaus during their argument, accusing him of not caring about what killed their family. Klaus doesn't bring up that he let slip that he goes their siblings' graves every day. Five doesn't acknowledge how he screamed back that he should have been buried right there next to them. Neither of them say anything about the part where Klaus agreed with him.

One week later, Klaus suggests they go outside to celebrate the leg splint coming off, and Five knows that they're okay.

Five bundles up heavily, and even then he knows that he's going to be losing way too many calories today. But when he starts walking around, legs pushing against the snow piled up around the entrance, he breathes deeply and is startled to find that it feels like the first time. The air is crisp and cold, and freezes the insides of his lungs, and it's - it's *good.*

Experimentally, Five crouches and springs up into the air, and lands with a jolt. There's only the faintest wobble from his left leg, however, and the rush of triumph takes Five completely by surprise. He feels a grin sneak onto his face before he can squash it.

He looks up and meets Klaus' eyes, who is sporting an ear-to-ear grin of his own. Klaus makes a *go-on* gesture, and leans back with an air of smug satisfaction. Delores sits beside him, dolled up in a jacket of her own and a knitted hat with a bright yellow pom-pom. Klaus picked it out over a month ago, and insists that the sequins around the brim absolutely complete the look.

Five feels an infusion of energy run through him, as if he's breathing in adrenaline instead of sharp winter air, and before he can think he feels his legs moving, and he's *plowing* into a snowdrift as high as his waist, and tumbling down into a mass of white, and it's freezing cold and there's a strange sound filling the air, echoing inside his head, and he realizes that the sound is coming from him, and it's laughter.

Then Klaus is laughing too, and urging Five to do it again, except with a larger snowdrift this time, and Five has no idea what comes over him but he spins around and throws a handful of snow right through Klaus' chest.

Klaus splutters and shouts foul, because it's not like he can return fire, but Five doesn't listen and gathers another handful. Klaus dives out of the way of this one, but Five has excellent aim, and the next ten minutes see more snow phasing through Klaus than not. They end up laughing so hard that Five, at least, cannot regain his breath for the next several minutes.

Then Klaus is nearing the end of his time for the day, but he stays a few extra minutes to explain why he made Five pick up hot cocoa. Five goes inside and even if it's made from a shitty packet of powder and musty bottled water, he's surprised by how much he likes it. He fills it with incredibly stale marshmallows and thinks he may have found out what nirvana tastes like.

It's the best day Five has had in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

AKA the one where I try to display the entire Hargreeves family dynamic in microcosm. And finally get Five to laugh for real, that was way harder than it has any right to be.

# Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the Incident They Don't Talk About, Klaus makes sure to coax Five outside at least once a week. It takes a lot of work, and the use of some creative threats, but he does it. As a result, Five begins to look less like a ghost and more like an actual living person, which Klaus is in the unique position of being a legitimate judge of.

Klaus, on the other hand, is as dead as ever. Which he's come to terms with, probably easier than he maybe should have, but still poses some logistical challenges now and then.

Such as the fact where he's been wearing the same outfit for over eight months now. Klaus has shockingly low standards for a lot of things - like, a *lot* of things - but his wardrobe has always been a point of pride for him. Dear old Dad never liked them to wear anything other than the standard Academy uniform when they were 'on the clock', which was almost always, but sometimes he didn't care and they ran wild. Klaus, of course, was always the most flamboyant about it, and made no secret of his fondness for clothing usually seen on the more trashy kind of club-goers (and/or prostitutes).

The thing is, Klaus actually does like that kind of clothing. He's pretty sure his family just thought he was doing it for attention, but walking around in Mom's heels and stealing Allison's feather boas was entirely for himself. He loves the bright colors that catch the corner of his eye, the way skirts swish around his legs, the soft tickle of faux fur against his neck. Klaus has always been a tactile person, and while he's not sure if that's due to his powers or just a thing about him, the result is that his clothing is something that he's always been very particular about. And while he does love the outfit he was wearing when he died, eight months is a bit much.

So here he is, sitting in the common room next to Delores, trying to meditate his way into a different set of clothes. He isn't really convinced that meditating will do anything, but Five was spectacularly unsympathetic when Klaus whined at him about it, and it's not like he has any better ideas.

"This isn't working," Klaus says with a huff after ten solid minutes of fidgeting. "Delores? Delores, how do I do this."

He imagines her giving him a sympathetic look. *'I'm sorry, Klaus,'* he can almost hear her saying. *'I wish I could help you. You would look wonderful in that green skirt.'*

"I *know!*" Klaus throws up his hands, bemoaning that it is very possible he will never get to wear the utterly *gorgeous* piece he saw the other day. "I just want - I want to be like you, Delores. You always look great."

*'I was made that way,'* she says modestly. *'And you and Five help out quite a bit. Thank you for that, by the way.'*

“Anytime,” Klaus assures her. Then he huffs, and closes his eyes again. He still has no idea why closing his eyes has the same effect even when he doesn’t have actual eyes any more, but whatever. “I’m going to try again, don’t interrupt me, please.”

Delores obligingly falls silent, and Klaus tries to focus himself or find his center or whatever it is that meditation is all about. He pokes at the energy coiling around inside him, and in his totally expert opinion it feels larger than it was two months ago. Klaus counts it as a good sign, although the lack of concrete numbers is driving Five crazy, as predicted. And even then, he’s managed to figure out that Klaus should be able to manifest half the time in another year, if he keeps practicing. Five’s brain is kind of scary, sometimes.

But Klaus is not thinking about Five right now. Instead, he thinks about the green skirt in the little hole-in-the-wall store he would have loved to frequent before it became an *actual* hole in the wall. The skirt is a dark forest green, embroidered with gold thread falling down one side of the hem like thin tendrils. Klaus just knows that it will bring out his eyes like nothing else, especially if he figures out how to apply eyeliner.

He thinks about the feel of cotton on his legs, and the elastic around his waist. He pictures the exact shade of green and gold of the materials, the way it must have looked before it got covered in the dust of the apocalypse. He thinks about how much he wants to wear that skirt, because it’s *beautiful* and there are so few beautiful things in this world, even fewer nowadays, and he wants so badly to be one of them.

Klaus thinks, and imagines, and *wants* -

- and he suddenly realizes that he’s not making up the feeling on his legs, and he opens his eyes and it’s there, he’s wearing it, *he did it.*

Klaus jumps up with a loud *“Motherfucker!”* and stares down at himself. It’s real alright, he’s wearing the skirt, and sweet jesus it looks even better than he thought it would. He twirls around and it flares out, gold thread flashing in the light, and Klaus *laughs.*

Klaus has never been one to repress (positive) emotions, so he spends the next several minutes hooting in triumph and jumping up and down around the room. He badgers Delores into dispensing dozens of compliments, and extols his prowess in fashion and power manipulation both. He excitedly theorizes about his future possible outfits, making and discarding plans at the speed of thought. There are so many things he’s never gotten to wear because either Dad didn’t like it or he couldn’t afford it, but now *the sky is the limit.*

It takes another two hours before he can calm down enough to change his top as well, which naturally prompts another round of celebration. Delores, the angel, bears the entire thing with perfect grace and patience. Klaus definitely needs to push Five into getting a larger wardrobe for her as a thank-you. She has a fondness for sequins, and Klaus is going to shower her with them until she’s the most dazzling thing on the planet.

Klaus loses track of the time, which is why he’s surprised when Five wanders into the room. It must be that time when his oversized brain goes on strike until he lets it rest for a while. Klaus guiltily realizes that he forgot to check if Five needed reminding about lunch.

Five doesn't seem too worse for wear, though, so Klaus resolves to keep a close eye on him for the rest of the day and tomorrow and lets go of the guilt. Instead, he makes himself visible and crows out, "Five! Five, look!"

Five glances at him, before stopping in his tracks. He blinks rapidly.

Klaus bounces up and down and spins around, showing off his new outfit from every angle. The top he's wearing is one of his old favorites, a lovely rose-pink number that shows off his shoulders. It was tragically destroyed a few months before the apocalypse, and wearing it again makes Klaus want to weep from joy. It compliments the skirt beautifully, and Klaus struggles to remember the last time he felt this pretty.

"You figured out how to change your appearance," Five states, looking him up and down. There's a gleam in his eye. "You're getting a better handle on your powers, then?"

Klaus frowns at him. "Yeah, I guess. But what do you think?" He spins again, arms out like a princess in a ballroom.

"I don't know yet, I need more data. Have you experimented with the limits of it yet? Do you think you can extend it to yourself instead of just your clothing?" Five grabs a spare notebook and pencil and plops down on the couch. He looks assessingly at Klaus. "How fast can you change?"

Klaus lowers his hands, slowly. "I….I don't know."

"Well, let's get started, then," Five flips open the notebook to a new page and starts writing. "First things first. How long did this," he waves a hand at Klaus, "take?"

Klaus doesn't answer.

Five stops writing and peers at him. "Klaus?"

"You know," Klaus says abruptly. "It actually took up a lot of energy. Like, a lot. So I'm just gonna -"

Then he fades back into invisibility, leaving Five to stare at the spot where he was standing, and flees the room as fast as his ghostly feet can take him.

Chapter End Notes

...I have no opinion on clothing but now I'm crying over a skirt. What has this fandom done to me.

# Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See end note for trigger warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Contrary to popular belief, Five can admit when he makes a mistake.

It's not something that comes naturally to him, of course. He's an arrogant, prideful bastard, and he knows it. The seething burn of being *wrong* is something that he tries to avoid at all costs. It helps that he's brilliant, and makes fewer mistakes than normal people.

But the fact remains that he *does* make mistakes, however much he would prefer otherwise. Five can't afford to not recognize that, because ignoring them is just stupid, and *that* is the one thing he *refuses* to be. Mistakes are made, acknowledged, and fixed with as much grace as he is capable of summoning. Which isn't very much, usually, but he makes up for it with pure determination.

Which brings him to now.

~~(What if -)~~

In hindsight, he realizes that he probably should have noticed Klaus was getting upset earlier. Five actually flounders for longer than he'd like to admit about *why* Klaus was upset, before he remembers Klaus sneaking into Allison's room to do impromptu fashion shows. Five never understood Klaus' fascination with clothing, but he feels like kicking himself for overlooking it. When he brings to mind Klaus' excited twirling to show off his new outfit, his urging to get Delores a truly expansive wardrobe and makeup supply, and his overall….*Klaus-ness,* Five grips his pencil so hard it snaps.

He feels like the stupidest person in the world. The worst brother in the world. It's probably even *true.*

Clearly, he needs to fix this.

He's just not sure *how.*

Especially since Klaus hasn't appeared today. It sets off an uncomfortable churning in Five's gut. Five has grown used to Klaus, and maybe even sort of relies on him a little to combat the pervasive (loneliness) isolation that defines his life now. If he was told a year ago that he would be *relying on Klaus* for *anything,* much less that Klaus *delivered,* he would have flat-out dismissed the entire thing. But here they are, eight months into the apocalypse, and Five has absolutely no idea what he would do without his brother.

~~(What if Klaus -)~~

Klaus, Five has come to realize, seems to have appointed himself as a quasi-caretaker for Five. Every second he can spend visible is geared towards helping Five, whether materially or mentally. Klaus probably thinks he's being subtle, but he never really got along with the concept. Hardly a day goes by when he doesn't mention another location in the city to plunder, continue urging Five to get outside and 'enjoy the sunshine', or - not often and always unprompted, because Five can't bring himself to ask - share an anecdote about their siblings from after he left.

Five now knows that Diego went vigilante after dropping out of the police academy (unsurprising, considering his usual reaction to authority), Luther stayed at the mansion with Dad (also unsurprising, he'll have to fix that when he gets back), Allison became a movie star (she always did like attention, and he, perhaps uncharitably and perhaps not, wonders how much of it is rumors and how much is real talent), and Vanya joined an orchestra (he knew it, she was always going to be amazing).

He hears the most about Ben, which is somewhat surprising and somewhat not. Ben was always the gentlest of them, quiet and retiring and kind. There was a hidden streak of sarcasm there, but he was always the peacemaker, the one ready to lend a hand. So it's not surprising that he would stay in contact with Klaus, push him to become sober, support him as best he could. A lot of Klaus' stories are complaining about Ben warning him against doing stupid things, which Five is going to have to thank Ben for once he goes back.

What Five can't puzzle out is why Ben never helped more.

It's the little things that catch his attention. While Klaus has commented on Diego dropping him into rehab, he never mentions Ben doing so. Ben apparently knew enough about Klaus' activities to track him down multiple times, but never offered him a place to stay. Klaus slipped once and mentioned an overdose, which made Five flinch, but apparently *Diego* was Klaus' emergency contact. Considering he's fairly certain Klaus saw Diego once a year at *most,* and Ben far more often, it's….strange.

And, with a jolt of surprise, Five realizes that Klaus hasn't told him what Ben did for a living. He's talked more about Allison's movies, which he's never seen because they cost money, than he's talked about what Ben does other than show up and sigh over Klaus' life choices.

Five frowns at his hands and tries to reconcile Ben with someone who would allow his brother to be homeless for thirteen years. The others….okay, yes, he can see it. If Klaus was out of sight, then he was out of mind for them. But Ben? He can't imagine Ben letting that happen, and yet he did.

It doesn't make *sense.*

Five growls to himself. There's something he's missing, he knows it. Something important, a key piece of information that will solve this entire mystery. He's nearly positive Klaus is keeping it from him, which is annoying and quite honestly would have gotten him a light stabbing were he still corporeal enough to be stabbed.

But.

But that is not the issue at hand right now. Five can focus on the secrets Klaus may or may not be keeping later, because *right now* Klaus still hasn't appeared because Five made a mistake big enough to genuinely upset him. Klaus has such thick skin it's incredibly difficult to offend him, but apparently Five is an overachiever in everything.

He needs to fix this. He needs to fix this, repair what he's broken, make it better. If he doesn't, how can he fix any of his other mistakes? What if it gets worse?

~~(What if Klaus leaves?)~~

Five abruptly punches the nearest wall. The impact splits his knuckles, jars his bones all the way up his arm, but fortunately nothing breaks. He's breathing hard all of a sudden, and he doesn't know why. The room is swimming, fading in and out, and Five staggers to the side.

"Klaus?" he hears, and he doesn't know why Klaus would say his own name so it must be Five talking. "I - Klaus?"

There is no answer.

"Klaus?!" his voice is higher now, something he was happy to leave behind last year, but now it's back for some reason.

Five slides down against the wall. There's a dull throbbing in his knuckles, but it's oddly distant. He's trying to breathe but it's suddenly become a monumental task, and despite all his supposed *genius* he can't figure out quite how to do it. He makes a frustrated, panicked noise.

"Hey, hey, Five, it's okay, calm down, it's okay, you're okay, just breathe, okay? Just breathe -"

At first he doesn't register the voice, then his eyes shoot up to where *Klaus* is kneeling in front of him, hands hovering uncertainly, taking exaggerated breaths with nonexistent lungs.

"- like that, okay? In, out, in, out, come on, Five, in, out -"

Five tries to follow the instructions, but it's *hard,* and he's wheezing despite the air being clear and still, he doesn't understand what's *wrong* with him -

- and then Klaus is hugging him.

Five all but collapses into his arms, and he forgets all about Ben and the apocalypse and the aching, hollow loneliness that's not choking him any longer. He buries his face into Klaus' chest and shakes, and somehow he's gasping in great gulps of air despite the obstruction.

"I'm sorry," he's babbling. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, you look great, I'm sorry, don't leave -"

*"Never,"* Klaus sounds shocked and sick and yet absolutely, utterly unshakeable. "Of course not, I'd never leave. I promise, Five, I won't leave."

Five closes his eyes and listens to that. Just that.

And then his eyes fly open and he all but throws himself away from Klaus. *"Why the fuck are you corporeal!"*

"Ghuh?" is Klaus' response.

"Stop being corporeal *now,* you idiot, you'll use up all your energy!" Five angrily demands - pleads, really, but he just had a panic attack, he's giving himself a modicum of leeway here.

"Okay, okay! Jesus christ, give a guy a hug and get the Spanish Inquisition," Klaus grumbles. He gets to his feet, scanning Five up and down as if he'll suddenly have a swooning fit.

"I -" and here Five has to bite his tongue because he *knows* his first response when he's feeling vulnerable is to lash out, and he's not going to wreck something that's just been repaired. "Sorry," he says instead, and it hardly even takes much effort. "I'm just - worried."

Klaus eyes him a bit, but he sighs and nods. "Yeah, okay. It did take a lot out of me."

"How much?" Five asks instantly.

Klaus grimaces. "I think I can stay a couple minutes? And maybe ten tomorrow." He looks at Five's face. "Or I can see how far I can push it."

"Don't," Five says. "That's - okay. It's okay. You just - you *will* come back?"

He doesn't mean to make it sound like a question, but it insists on coming out like that anyways.

"Yes," Klaus says at once. "I promise."

"Alright," says Five. "Alright."

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warning: depiction of a panic attack, mild self-injury.

***

Oh, you thought Klaus was the only sad boi here? Hahaha, no.

# Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Over the next several weeks, Klaus does everything he can to expand the pool of energy in his chest. He has little to no idea how to do that, but he makes up for it with sheer creativity.

It's not like he hasn't realized before that he's kind of responsible for Five now. It's an uncomfortable feeling that Klaus would really, *really* prefer to ignore, but he can't. As much as he always used to tease Five about being older thanks to their numbers, now he actually is older. Five is fourteen and Klaus is thirty, and as they are almost certainly the only ones left alive on the planet it falls to Klaus to be the Adult here.

It helps, of course, that Five is incredibly self-sufficient. Between his training and his freakishly huge brain, he's got the survival half of life in the apocalypse down pat. All Klaus has to do is scout out the ruins, and offer a few tips here and there, from his own experiences.

It's the other half Five has trouble with. The part about *living,* not just surviving.

And it's not like Klaus is an expert on that either. He's still not certain which parts of his life qualify as which, himself. The drugs? The sex? He has a feeling Ben would object to that, and Ben has been his conscience-slash-keeper for so long it's almost automatic to imagine him looking over Klaus' shoulder, urging him to make better choices.

So, in the spirit (hah!) of paying it forward, Klaus has resigned himself to doing the same for Five. Frankly, half the time he's just asking himself 'what would Ben do', and doing that, and it seems to be working out so far. Barring a few breakdowns, but Klaus has had a few of those himself and Ben wasn't really any help there. At least Klaus can hug Five.

Which seems to help, as long as Five doesn't remember Klaus is running down his energy to appear. So clearly the best solution here is to become capable of staying corporeal as long as he wants, and apply a regular dose of hugs to his little brother. Klaus figures he'll even get in some practice at speedily becoming uncorporeal, once Five grows annoyed enough to stab him. Win-win.

(Klaus tries not to think about the times when he would have killed - literally *killed* - to have Ben hug him. Even despite the fact that Klaus has somehow managed to be the only one of his siblings besides Vanya without a bodycount - thanks to his sheer terror that he would be haunted for all eternity - he can remember several instances where he would have gladly murdered anyone in front of him just to hug his brother again.)

It takes until mid-February for Klaus to hit upon something that works, and even then it's slow. He finds out that if he *flares* the energy through him for several seconds, he feels like a firework's gone off under his skin. It leaves him feeling both energized and exhausted all at once, and he has trouble manifesting for the rest of the day. Not enough to cut into his time, but it's a strain. He resolves not to do it again.

Except the next day, his energy pool ("We need to name it something different." "What? Why?" "It sounds stupid." "Fuck you, it's part of me, thus I get to name it.") is slightly larger. Not by much, but enough for him to notice, when before he could only measure growth by comparing it to weeks or months ago.

Klaus flares again the next day, and the day after the pool is larger by roughly the same amount. He keeps doing it for a week before he tells Five via picking him up in an enormous hug. Klaus can't help it, okay, he's not as short as Vanya but he's way smaller than Klaus ever remembers any of his siblings being.

Five fights like a semi-rabid alley cat (as Klaus can personally attest), so the hug doesn't last very long, but Klaus considers it a good start. Then there comes the inevitable fight once Five finds out what Klaus has been doing behind his back, along with the equally inevitable reconciliation when Five realizes there is Science! to be done.

Five fills up three chalkboards, front and back, with scribbled equations Klaus cannot decipher for the death of him. He's fairly certain Five is making up half the symbols as he goes. Klaus is asked a barrage of questions that he can only answer a fraction of, and watches as Five spins the vague dribbles into even more equations. He thinks Five may have empirically proven the existence of souls at one point, it's a little hazy.

The frenzy lasts three whole days, hampered only by Klaus' inability to stay visible for too long still, and for the first time he's grateful for that. Five in full-on Science! mode is terrifying. Klaus thought he had seen it all, but *nope,* turns out that was just the warm-up.

By the end of February, Klaus can stay visible for forty minutes a day, along with fully materializing for about thirty seconds. He uses this time wisely, and Five gets hug-ambushed near-daily. The little gremlin fights and swears, but Klaus knows for a fact that his jumps are working almost perfectly again, so he just grins and squeezes tighter.

(Fuck, he hopes Five gets hugs from someone when he goes back. He hopes Five can accept them.)

According to Five's technobabble ("It's not *babble,* you idiot, your tiny brain just can't comprehend anything more complex than two plus two -" "Aw, Fivey, you say the sweetest things!") Klaus kickstarted something, which prompted something else, which accelerated a whole lot of everything, and the upshot is that Klaus is probably going to be able to stay visible for as long as he wants within the year, and fully corporeal for as long as he wants within three. Klaus is pretty sure he's not going to do that, because he's actually kind of grown used to being intangible, but the 'visible' part sounds nice.

"I can talk to you *all the time!*" Klaus tells Five cheerily.

Five's expression tells Klaus that he did not think this through. Klaus falls over laughing.

Around this time, the snow starts melting. It's not quite enough to go out scavenging again, but another couple weeks and things should be clear. Five grumbles that everything is going to be soaked, but Klaus is pretty sure he's found enough supplies tucked away that that won't be a problem.

Klaus coaxes Five outside more often now, nearly every other day. Five mostly ends up pacing around and muttering to himself, but hey, fresh air and all that shit. He's been doing fewer of his little stare-offs with the Eye lately, so Klaus counts it as a win.

Life (and death) is good.

Until March 18th, that is.

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUN.

# Chapter 10

March 18th is warm enough that Five decides he is going to do his first supply run of the year. He's not *completely* certain that it's March 18th, of course. Back before Klaus managed to contact him, the days had all started to blur together, and Klaus didn't even know the date of his death until Five told him (it prompted a lot of laughter and a rambling half-explanation of what 'April Fool's Day' was. Five decided he wasn't a fan). But Five is nothing if not determined, and he looks at star charts and measures day lengths and eventually narrows down the date to 87% certainty. He keeps careful track with handmade calendars and meticulous checkmarks, and if he says it's March 18th then it damn well is.

"Where are we going?" Klaus asks, sitting cross-legged in the wagon. Five debates with himself whether to tell him to get out and walk. It's not like Klaus weighs anything, but it's irksome to see him being pulled along while Five is the one doing the pulling.

Five glances one more time at the folded map in his hands, before tucking it into his coat. He grabs the wagon handle and decides to take the high ground today. "The sporting goods store on Forty-sixth, first, I need more lamp oil. Then to the house with the condensed soup and bottled water, and the supermarket with the clams and makeup on the way back."

"Delores is going to look *amazing,"* Klaus cheers, raising his hands in the air. He's wearing a brilliantly purple skirt with a white silk top today, and since he managed to 'apply' makeup two weeks ago he hasn't gone a minute without it. It's fairly restrained today, just some light mascara and a hint of purple eyeshadow. Five was mildly surprised to find out that his brother can be actually *tasteful* when he applies makeup now, instead of making himself look like a clown at every opportunity. Apparently he *has* changed somewhat since Five left.

"She is," Five says, and he finds he's looking forward to presenting Delores with the nail polish Klaus swears will knock her metaphorical socks off. Five actually wondered, after he confirmed Klaus was real, if he should get rid of Delores, but his gut had lurched so unpleasantly he'd dismissed the thought instantly. He's very glad he didn't, because however much he loves Klaus, there are times when Five wants more sedate company. Delores is a fantastic listener, asks intelligent questions, and never interrupts him when he's following a particularly interesting line of thought. Five wants to thank her for that, so - nail polish.

"Well then," Klaus says, and poses with a hand pointing in front of him. "Onwards!"

**********

The lamp oil is right where Klaus said it would be, which makes Five smile. He finds himself doing that a lot more often lately, for some reason.

"Do you need help with those?" Klaus asks, eyeing the canisters. He kept himself invisible most of the way here, and apparently plans to do the same during all the 'boring travel parts'. Once or twice he appeared to give commentary on some bit of rubble they passed ("That looks *exactly* like the Statue of David! Doesn't it?" "Who?" "...Never mind."), but for the

most part he's conserving his energy. Five absentmindedly calculates Klaus has used up twelve of his forty-four minutes so far.

He huffs at Klaus. "I'm fine," he says, and picks up one of the canisters. It's large, certainly, nearly the size of his torso. Five is not going to admit that it *is* really heavy, and he hides any hint of strain as he lugs it over to the wagon.

Five ignores Klaus' raised eyebrows as he brings over the other two canisters. By the third, he's breathing heavily, but refuses to say anything about it, and shoots a look to Klaus that says he better not either. Klaus holds up his hands in surrender, amusement written all over his face.

Jackass.

The trip over to the house with water and soup is short and uneventful. It's only a few blocks, but Klaus appears twice to draw Five's attention towards interesting bits of the landscape he's been hoarding for a while. Five won't admit that he snorts a bit when Klaus throws out his arms to an enormous stuffed gorilla and exclaims, "Luther! Fancy meeting you here!"

There's less water than Five would have liked, but he'll have to make do. It's not like water is his main source of hydration anyways, although Klaus seems to prioritize the locations of bottled water when he's reporting. Five thinks it's massively hypocritical of his brother to worry about *him* drinking alcohol, when he's fairly certain Klaus started drinking at eight or nine, but whatever. Water is useful, so he just rolls his eyes and goes with it.

The condensed soup is a better find. There are twenty-two cans, which means Five will be thoroughly sick of lentils but adequately fed. He piles them next to the oil canisters and regards the whole thing with a critical eye. "Klaus?"

"Yes, *mein bruder?*" Klaus says, becoming visible. He's slouched against the side of the wagon, which raises a whole host of questions about how he interacts with the physical world when he's not corporeal, but Five manages to push aside the thoughts for now.

Five chews over the words he wants to say. There's a part of him that wants to dismiss some of the things Klaus has said about the last seventeen years of his life. It's a larger part of him than he'd like to admit. It's the part that shouts at Five on particularly ugly nights, the one that says *you abandoned them, left them to die, what makes you think you can save them when you left them to suffer and die.* It's the part that cries out in denial to hear anything about Klaus' life (homeless for thirteen years, what the *fuck*), just to spare him from picturing his brother hurting without anyone there to help him.

But. But he also needs to ask, because as much as it makes Five's skin crawl to make the comparison, Klaus is the closest thing to an expert in these matters.

"What do I need that I don't know I need?" Five asks at last.

"A sense of humor," Klaus says at once. "And some self-preservation wouldn't go amiss, and for the love of god please get a better fashion sense, I am *begging* you." He clasps his hands and looks piously at Five.

Five growls. “*Supplies,* you idiot. I’m talking about supplies.”

Klaus blinks at him. “Uh, I told you all about all the caches around here….”

“Yes, but those were all for things I asked about. What -” he tries to get the words out without their thorns digging into his throat. “What would you get, if you were still on the streets?”

Klaus opens his mouth.

“Except drugs,” he tacks on hastily.

Klaus closes his mouth. And he just - looks at Five for a moment. For all that Klaus is loud and flamboyant and emotive, he’s surprisingly hard to read right now. Five wonders when, and why, he learned that particular skill.

“Okay,” Klaus says, and claps his hands together as he sits up straight. “So, first things first, socks.”

“Socks?” Five asks.

“You’ve been doing okay, but socks are *really* important. You should definitely have at least twice as many as you do right now, and always carry a spare pair with you,” Hearing Klaus speaking in a tone eerily similar to Herr Karlson at breakfast is a bit disconcerting, but Five pays close attention. “If you have to prioritize washing any of your clothes, always wash the socks first. Also, lip gloss.”

“What,” Five says.

“Or chapstick!” Klaus says quickly. “You can use chapstick, I guess. The important thing is keeping your lips from cracking. And keep your nails short, it’s a bitch when you catch one on something and tear it open to the quick.”

Five curls his hands into fists in an unconscious reaction. Klaus nods sympathetically and hums.

“You already got the big stuff down,” he says absently. “I’ll think about it. But remember - socks, chapstick, nails. I’m pretty sure there’s some at the department store….”

“I’ll look for them,” Five promises.

Klaus shoots him a quick smile, and vanishes when Five starts to tug the wagon forward.

There, Five tells himself. He asked, and the answer wasn’t horrifying or terrible or painful. He can do this. He can do this.

Five trudges on towards the department store.

**********

Placing the last of the socks on the wagon, Five feels pleased with himself. He now has nine more pairs of socks, not quite as many as Klaus advised but a good start nonetheless. He has two sets of nail clippers and several tubes of chapstick nestled between the cases of water, and on top of all that there were several cans of tuna under the shelf with the clams that Klaus couldn't see. Five feels rich, flush with resources.

Klaus is chattering away about some story - Five only started paying attention when Ben's name popped up, but Klaus sort of twitched and Ben disappeared from the narrative after that, so Five couldn't really say what Klaus is talking about now. Something about Mexican food. Five pulls the wagon along the floor towards the exit.

The thing is, he nearly misses it.

He pulls past a few ruined shelves, glances over the merchandise automatically to see if there's anything of interest. He's about to move on, when half an image catches his eye -

and the world stops.

Five stumbles to a halt and whips his head around to stare. Because yes, that's right, he isn't hallucinating. Peeking out from behind a mangled hardcover is a frozen image he would know if he lived to be fifty, a hundred years old without ever seeing again. One he's wondered if he'll ever see again.

*Vanya.*

# Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> So you may have noticed that I have a definitive chapter count for this story now. I have the rest of it all written out and ready to go. But fear not, I'm in the process of writing the sequel as we speak. I already have an interquel one-shot done.
>
> For now, though, enjoy some more Klaus!

It's not like Klaus forgot about The Book.

The Book, capital letters, because if the Eye deserves capital letters because it's owner destroyed the world then The Book deserves them because it's writer destroyed another. A smaller one, perhaps, and one not many people cared about, but it was still there, and then it wasn't.

Klaus remembers reading The Book. He was in rehab, again, and despite his hidden superpower of smuggling drugs into *anywhere* there were actually people there trained to notice if their charges were high, so he sort of had to go on a reduced diet, so to speak.

Ben was reading over his shoulder, and he'd been fairly appalled, which was kind of odd because he was the one Vanya had been nicest about. Nothing to improve your reputation like dying, although Ben actually *was* the nicest of all of them so Klaus didn't get too upset about that.

She'd made Five look a lot better than he was, though, probably partly because they'd been close and partly because of Five's disappearance. Klaus can admit that Five isn't *as* bad as he thought when he was younger, but The Book didn't mention anything about his god complex or homicidal temper or terrible dress sense, so Book-Five only sort of ended up resembling the real thing.

Klaus actually has mixed feelings about The Book.

On the one hand, he can admit that they treated Vanya pretty horribly. He thinks she missed the part where they were *all* treated pretty horribly, but okay, she had a right to be bitter. And really, making money off their miserable childhood was a stroke of genius. Klaus is kind of annoyed he didn't think of it. He once tried to figure out how much Vanya made off The Book and convert it into how much drugs he could buy, and ended up getting drunk because *dear god the missed opportunity.*

On the other hand….

Klaus doesn't remember overly much about the week before the apocalypse, but he remembers flashes of the way everybody treated Vanya. Diego was the most overt about it, but everyone kind of pretty clearly resented her for writing The Book and smearing their shitty childhoods all over the pages. Even Ben was mad, albeit more on Klaus' behalf than anything else.

Klaus knows that he has reason to be angry at Vanya. Hell, he might have better reason than anyone, unless it's true that it played a role in Allison's divorce and losing custody of her daughter (which, ouch).

And….well.

Maybe Klaus is a little angry. The consequences of the entire world learning you're a drug addict who likes to fuck men are not exactly *pleasant,* and he doubts Vanya really thought that one through. But Klaus came out of it okay, and the hype died down soon enough, and all in all Klaus would kind of just prefer to….forget. The entire thing.

He's never been completely successful at that, but it's the best he can do.

So when Five makes a *sound* that Klaus has heard a single-digit number of times in his life, even fewer of which have ever come from any of his siblings, Klaus whips his head around to see Five *lunging* at a bookshelf. He grabs one of the books like it'll disappear if he doesn't catch it quick enough, and stares at the cover like it's the Holy Fucking Grail.

And something inside Klaus realizes what it is, even before he sees the cover.

It's ragged. It's worn. It's damp from the elements and the shitty paperback version instead of hardcover and there's a tear that splits little Vanya's face in two, but there it is. The Book.

And Klaus realizes that there is one more world to destroy.

Five is barely breathing, staring at the picture of Vanya, and oh. Right. That's the Vanya he remembers, the one he left behind. No wonder he made that sound.

"Vanya," Five breathes, barely loud enough to qualify as a whisper.

Klaus is frozen. Five is holding The Book. Just one leaf through the pages will bring Ben's death crashing into him, shatter all the deflections and implicit inferences and, okay, *lies* that Klaus has been telling for the past several months. Lies that Ben was okay after Five left, that he didn't get hurt, that he didn't *die.*

Klaus makes himself visible.

"Five," he says, quietly. He has no idea what else to say.

"Klaus," Five says. He blinks, and manages to tear his eyes away from The Book. "This - this is - Vanya wrote a book?"

"....Yeah," Klaus says, because he doesn't think Five would buy *'no, she didn't, that's some other Vanya Hargreeves who looked exactly like our sister when she was thirteen.'*

“Why - why didn’t you tell me?” Five’s hand hovers over little Vanya’s face, like he’s worried the image will melt away if he touches it. Although considering the cover has some clear signs of water damage, that’s not entirely out of the question.

“....Wasn’t sure any copies survived.” Hoping, more like it.

“You didn’t find any?”

“No.” But that’s probably because he wasn’t looking. Maybe he should have. He can be corporeal for thirty seconds a day now. You can do a lot of damage in thirty seconds.

Five seems to notice the title for the first time. He mouths it out. “An autobiography?”

“Yeah.” Klaus breathes.

Five - smiles.

It’s still rare, Five smiling. Delores garners the most out of him, Klaus has managed to coax out a few, and sometimes it happens when Five finishes a particularly thorny equation. But they’re still few and far between. Klaus is mostly okay with that. Five is not a particularly happy person in general, and this entire situation is not one that’s really conducive to changing that. Klaus will take what he can get, and counts every smile as a victory.

This one feels like a defeat.

“Five,” he says again.

Five looks up at him. “Hm?”

Klaus swallows. Looks at his brother. Braces himself.

“Can I ask you to do something?”

Five frowns. “Like what?”

Klaus closes his eyes. “Just. Can I?”

“....Of course, Klaus. What is it?”

So easy. Five really shouldn’t trust him so much. Vanya would totally tell him not to.

Klaus swallows again.

“Please don’t read that.”

There is silence.

“What?”

“Just -” Klaus’ voice catches. “*Please* don’t read that.”

“What -” Klaus opens his eyes, the hardest thing he’s ever done, and sees Five clutching The Book to his chest. He looks - confused. Completely confused. “I - Klaus, *what?*”

Klaus takes a deep breath he doesn’t actually need. “Please,” he says. “Put it back. I - take the cover if you want, but please don’t read it.”

Five opens and closes his mouth. Under any other circumstances, Klaus would be crowing about *finally* making the smug bastard speechless, but he doesn’t feel much of anything right now.

“I - what the fuck?” Five says, and then recovers some of his ability to form complete sentences. “Klaus, why the fuck would I do that?!”

Klaus closes his eyes again. It’s funny, the way that works. It’s not like having actual eyelids, where some light still filters through. It’s complete blackness, the kind you’d get if you were stuck in an underground room with no windows.

Like a mausoleum.

“Because I asked you to,” he says.

There is a long, long silence.

“Why?” Five says at last. There’s anger there. A lot of anger, which is reasonable. What Klaus is asking *isn’t* reasonable. It’s not reasonable, or fair, or in any way okay. “Why are you asking that, Klaus? Is there something in here I should *know?*”

And then Klaus realizes that Five has realized he’s been lying. Not about what, he’s pretty sure, but Five knows there’s something. Klaus tried and fails to be surprised. Five’s always been a genius, he really should have seen this coming.

Klaus stays in darkness for a moment longer. He has never, ever wanted to before. It’s an unfamiliar feeling.

He opens his eyes.

“Yes,” he says, honestly, and he sees the slightest hint of surprise in Five’s eyes. “Yes, there is. And I’ll tell you, okay? I will. Just please don’t read that book.”

“What is it?” Five demands. His voice is shaky. “Tell me what it is.”

“Tomorrow.” He cuts off the anger that springs into Five’s eyes at that. “I’m almost at my limit for today. I swear I’ll tell you tomorrow, Five, I swear on *our siblings’ graves.* Just put the book back.”

Klaus swallows again.

*“Please.”*

Five stares at him, The Book held loosely against his chest. He’s so fucking young.

*We were just kids,* Klaus thinks, to a bastard he knows will never listen. *Just little kids.*

They stare at each other, frozen in time. A boy, a ghost, and the end of the world.

Five closes his eyes.

“Okay.”

# Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> And here it is, the confrontation you've all been waiting for! I hope I did it justice, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five would do a lot for Klaus.

He would do a lot for any of his siblings, if he's being honest. Anything, really. If he were being utterly, absolutely truthful, he's trying to avert the apocalypse not so much to save the world but to save *them.* The memory of their bodies is one that refuses to fade, refuses to lose the slightest edge of the razor sharpness that flays him to the bone every time he thinks of it. The gravedirt under his fingernails, the glazed-over eyes, the *smell* -

So. Yes, he would do a lot for his siblings - burn the world, save it, what's the difference? He knows he's not a good person, made his peace with it years ago. As long as they're alive and okay, his world is in perfect order, and that's all he really cares about.

Klaus, though.

He still refuses to use any flowery words for it, but Klaus just *being* here has probably saved Five's sanity. Five worked it out a couple months ago, and he can't deny the numbers. He's healthier, calmer, and genuinely happier than he was before Klaus made his appearance. There are ups and downs, but compared to the unending, smothering *silence* that defined his life for those first six months, Five can honestly say with zero hesitation that he would rather have Klaus talk his ear off for the next several decades than go through another day of that.

Five knows that Klaus' existence is a random fluke of his powers, and not something Klaus planned in the least. It was complete chance that led Klaus to discover he could manifest himself. Klaus is almost certainly as lonely as Five is - possibly moreso, he was always the extrovert of the family. There is even a small possibility Five would be further along in figuring out time travel if he was alone.

And none of that matters, because Five owes Klaus infinitely more than he can express just for staying.

He didn't realize how much, though, until he agreed to leave Vanya's book behind. It turns out that even when he can admit he would do *anything* for his siblings, he can still be surprised by what that turns out to entail.

Now, Five sits on the ratty couch he dragged down from the library reading room, Delores to his right, and a glass of red wine on the table in front of him. It's extremely tempting to down

the whole thing in one go, but Five refuses to be drunk for this conversation.

Afterwards is entirely fair game, which is why he has the rest of the bottle near the foot of the couch, but Five is determined to make it through this sober.

And then - between one moment and the next - Klaus appears.

He's on the chair across from Five. He's wearing the same outfit from yesterday, which hasn't happened since he learned to change clothes. He looks as if he needs sleep and hasn't gotten it, and even though he's been dead this whole time this is the first time he's looked like it.

Five feels a twist inside his chest, and ruthlessly stomps it down. He's the one who was lied to. He's the one who deserves comfort. He's the one who left behind *Vanya's book* just because Klaus asked him to.

Five never realized just how hard doing *anything* was, before.

The silence stretches between them.

"So," Five says, abruptly. He's much less of a fan of silence than he used to be. "The book."

Klaus nods, slowly. "She wrote it five - no, six years ago now. Kind of hit us by surprise."

"She didn't tell any of you?" Five asks. That sounds….vaguely unlike Vanya. She barely ever did anything to attract attention. Five knows that it chafed at her sometimes, but to do something so bold….

"Nah," Klaus laughs a little. "We'd have stopped her, and she didn't want that."

An autobiography describing Vanya's childhood would, by necessity, have described the childhoods of the rest of them as well. Five feels a little uncomfortable at the idea. Before the world ended, how many people knew about what his own 'special training' entailed? He'd only obliquely described it to Vanya, but if she put it in her book then a lot of people could have worked it out.

But - no, Vanya wouldn't do that. He feels confident about that. Chances are she may not have been kind to them in some places - he knows that for all of her meekness, there was definitely some resentment there - but she wouldn't go that far. Five never expected her to write an autobiography, but when he thinks of the envy in her eyes whenever she watched them go out the door, it becomes a lot easier to swallow.

"Okay," Five says, and before he can overthink himself he asks, "So, what aren't you telling me?"

Because Five owes Klaus more than he can express, but that doesn't mean he owes him everything. He was okay with leaving it while it didn't impact their daily life, but now it's all come bubbling to the surface and Five wants answers.

Five thinks of the torn-off book cover in his room, and his heart clenches.

Yeah. He needs answers.

Klaus looks….sad? Resigned? Five has never seen that expression on his face before.

His brother sighs, and says, “Well, I guess I couldn’t keep it from you forever. You know, that one saying is bogus. Vanya and I are *both* dead and we couldn’t keep a secret.”

“Klaus,” Five bites out.

“Alright, I know.” Klaus sighs again. “Well. The thing is.”

He hesitates, but Five is patient. He doesn’t blink, and Klaus fidgets and looks away.

“Ben….died.”

Five frowns. “I know he did, you *all* -”

And then he stops.

And then he stares.

And then everything makes absolute, horrible sense.

How many times did he wonder why Klaus, of all people, was closest to Ben? How many times did Klaus skip over what Ben did after the Academy? How many times did Five think it strange that Ben had so much time to spare for their junkie brother, but never offered anything more than words?

Because that was all he could do. Because Klaus was the only person who could see him.

Because Ben died.

The world is spinning, almost like it does when Five overstretches himself with jumping. Five feels every breath in his lungs, every beat of his heart, with agonizing clarity.

He wrenches his focus back to Klaus, forces the world to steady. He has a lot of practice, but for some reason it’s so much harder this time.

“When?” His voice comes out scratchy and unsteady.

“Seventeen.” Klaus answers, eyes dark, voice soft.

That knocks the breath out of Five, and he has to fight for control of the world all over again.

*Seventeen.* Four years after Five left. He thinks of the times he landed before coming to the apocalypse. He doesn’t know exactly when he ended up, those first couple jumps. Was Ben already dead, while Five was running down the street exulting about finally being able to time travel?

He feels sick.

“How?” Five asks. He tries to keep his voice even, but fails.

“A mission,” Klaus looks away. “I don’t know the details, I wasn’t there, and - and he never wanted to talk about it.”

Silence falls again, except for Five’s heartbeat roaring in his ears. The last heartbeat left.

Klaus looks tense, poised on the edge of his seat, shoulders braced. His eyes dart to Five’s face, and away, and back again. Delores watches them quietly, understanding the delicacy of the situation.

“I see,” Five swallows, and finally manages to get his voice under control. “Well, more information would be nice, but I’ll - I’ll fix that.”

Klaus starts. “You belie-” he says, before he clamps his mouth shut.

Five blinks at him. “What?”

Klaus looks oddly uncertain. “You….believe that I saw him? After?”

Five can only stare. He opens his mouth, and closes it again.

“That’s *literally your power,*” he says at last.

“Yeah,” Klaus laughs a little, bitterly. “You’d think people would remember that.”

“Did….did they *not?*” Five asks, bewildered.

“Nope,” Klaus says. “I mean, I know I’m not so good with the whole *reliability* thing, and I was pretty far into drugs by then, but - *Ben.* I wouldn’t….I wouldn’t lie about Ben.”

Five’s estimation of the Academy’s collective IQ drops heavily. Did he take *all* the intelligence with him when he left?

“I know,” Five says. And then, “Thanks for telling me.”

Klaus gives him a watery smile. “No problem, bro.”

Five takes a deep breath and lets it out, and leans back on the couch. “So, can I read Vanya’s book now?”

“Uh.”

Chapter End Notes

Poor Klaus, there isn't even an excuse this time.

# Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Klaus keeps an eye on Five as he reads. Five lingers over certain passages, blitzes through others, and makes copious marks with a ballpoint pen on every single page. Occasionally he makes a face, but since this is his second readthrough those are few and far between.

It's not like Klaus *wanted* Five to read The Book, but at that point it would just be a dick move to say no. Now that the truth about Ben is out in the open (and Klaus never thought that would happen and they would still be on speaking terms), there's no actual reason not to. Plus, Klaus is like 98% sure Five would have done it anyways.

Five hasn't said anything about The Book. As in, he literally hasn't spoken a single sentence since he sat down to read it. Granted, he doesn't know for sure Klaus is in the room, but Delores is sitting in a chair and he hasn't spoken to her either.

"My bet is that he's adjusting to Vanya actually exposing the fact that he's a big gooey softie inside." Klaus tells Delores. "You?"

*'A lady doesn't gossip about her friends,'* she tells him primly. *'But I do think that's likely.'*

Klaus nods and basks in Delores' perfection for a bit. The only sound is the scratch of Five's pen and the turning of pages. Klaus wonders if, when Five goes back and undoes all of *this,* Vanya will write The Book again. Maybe, maybe not. It could go either way, really. Klaus hopes that if she does, he has a better time of it the second time around.

When Five reaches the end of the chapter, Klaus decides enough is enough. "So," he says, making himself visible. "You need to eat dinner. I recommend the lentils."

Five twitches at the mention of lentils (some poor planning on his part led to him eating them for two weeks straight over the winter, and Klaus has discovered the excellent threat of directing him to find more in the time since) and glares at Klaus.

Klaus hides his discomfort at that. Vanya….wasn't exactly kind when she was describing his antics. She attributed them to his compulsive attention-seeking, and okay, he didn't ever go out of his way to actually disprove that (he's pretty sure no one would have listened - irony!). Five was always closer to Vanya, and there's a very real possibility he'll take her side in this.

The thought of Five deciding that The Book's portrayal of Klaus is one hundred percent correct, and treating him like the rest of their siblings used to, is….surprisingly painful.

But Five just says, "Don't joke about that."

Klaus mimes a wounded heart to cover his relief. "But how will I launch my stand-up comedy act if lentils are off-limits? It figures - I only have a single audience member, and

he's even more dead inside than I am!"

"Are you *ever* going to run out of death jokes?"

Five sounds completely resigned when he says it, so Klaus has no problem with replying, "I have enough material to last until *your* death, at which point I'll be able to start all over again. Isn't it great?"

Five groans, and stumbles off the couch to get dinner.

Klaus keeps up a steady chatter the whole time - he likes talking, sure, but he's also noticed that Five relaxes at hearing another person's voice, so it's no trouble to keep a commentary going whenever he's visible.

Five gets out a can of vegetable soup, although Klaus is pretty sure he doesn't look and just grabs one at random, and downs it all in one go. Klaus can't actually scold him about that without bursting into flames from the hypocrisy, because he did the exact same thing only with things not *nearly* as healthy as vegetable soup, so he just relates an anecdote of *someone* he knew who did that and almost choked to death. And then their asshole freeloader brother laughed at them.

Klaus is pretty used to Five not actually paying attention to the words he's saying (he's tested by slipping in a few false details, and so far Five hasn't questioned how Klaus would get his hands on a five-thousand dollar Armani suit, or learn to fly an airplane, or win a kung-fu battle against a group of ninjas working for a man with a Persian cat fetish), which is why it's surprising when Five pauses halfway through the story and looks over at him.

"I'm sorry they didn't believe you," Five says, looking slightly uncomfortable but undeniably sincere.

Klaus snaps his mouth shut.

He knows what Five is referring to. Vanya, like the rest of his siblings, had been absolutely *incensed* when Klaus had tried to tell them about Ben standing right next to them on the day of his funeral. The entire thing is one big blur to Klaus, but he's pretty sure Luther was barely stopped from breaking his arms and/or neck. The recreation of the scene in The Book was brief, but definitely not on Klaus' side.

Five read that section with a completely blank face. It's the only page in The Book without a single mark on it.

"To be fair to them," Klaus says after a pause, "I was pretty high. That's kind of frowned upon when you're at your brother's funeral."

"They didn't even question you being high," Five says. "They just thought you were being a junkie, when - everyone grieves differently. And, again, *seeing the dead is literally your power.*"

Klaus gives him half a grin and wonders, perhaps unfairly and perhaps not, whether Five would have said that if he'd been there. If he hadn't time-travelled, if he'd stayed and watched Klaus' spectacular tailspin into needles and powders and pills, if he stood next to Ben's stupid statue and listened to his junkie brother claim to see the ghost of the one person who made life in the Academy bearable.

But there's no way to know, so Klaus takes what he can get and just says, "Guess you took all the logic with you, little bro. Well, half of it. Ben had the other half."

"Clearly," Five mutters, and chucks out the empty can of soup. Then he glances over at Klaus and says, hesitantly, "Is it - strange? Him not being here?"

Klaus is silent.

Of course it's strange - more than strange, it's downright *spooky,* and this is coming from the ghost who used to see dead people. Klaus has thirty years of never, ever being alone, always seeing movement from the corner of his eye and hearing voices nobody else could hear and trying so, so desperately to find some way to get rid of it all. Now that it's finally happened, he finds the absence….not *uncomfortable,* but unexpectedly gaping.

And Ben? Ben was - he was always there. Sometimes Klaus took too much and he'd go away, but those times were few and far between and usually heralded an overdose. None of those times could have prepared Klaus for him to disappear completely. Nearly a year later and Klaus is still looking over his shoulder to trade amused glances with his brother or make a quip that might put a small smirk on his face, only to stumble short when there's no one there.

Klaus used to be pretty resentful of his siblings for never believing him about Ben. But….if this is how they felt, if this is how death and grief looks for normal people, he's found that he's a lot more forgiving of their behavior at the funeral. God, why didn't anyone tell him how much it *hurts?*

"Yeah," Klaus says, finally. "It - yeah."

He's not upset in the least that Five is going to erase that part of the timeline. Five will remember, which isn't ideal, but - Ben being alive, and no one ever experiencing differently, is something Klaus would gladly give the world for. The world is pretty shitty now, so that's a less impressive trade than it would be otherwise, but luckily Klaus doesn't actually have to do anything but keep his brother alive and hopefully sane.

Five nods and looks down. He frowns. "The absence of ghosts implies a lot of things about what caused the apocalypse, but I'm not sure what all of them *are.*"

"Beats me," Klaus sighs. The memory of *white* flashes through his head, and he represses a shiver. He told Five about what he could remember, but so far neither of them have any real idea of what happened. Klaus, thanks to his new inability to sleep, can say with absolute certainty that there is no one left alive in the city, or in the one a day's travel from here. He's reluctant to explore further away from Five, but with spring coming in Five is bringing up the idea of trips further out.

Klaus is pretty sure there isn't anyone left. Five….says he agrees, but Klaus knows that he still has a small, quiet hope. He'd deny it if pressed, and he might not even want to have it, but it's still there.

Five shakes his head and glances at Klaus. "You should save your energy. I'm going to be reading for a while."

"Fine, fine," Klaus waves a hand. Then, without warning, he swoops down and gathers Five in his newly corporeal arms. "Daily hug dose!"

Five hisses, but it's more resigned than anything, and doesn't try to fight. Klaus has trained him so well.

Maybe he won't fuck this up too badly after all.

Chapter End Notes

A little more understated than the previous few chapters, but I figured we all deserve a break.

# Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I really don't say this anywhere near enough, but thank you for all of your lovely feedback! I always get so excited when I recieve comments!

Speaking of, what do you think of this chapter? Hm?

Five makes a new mark on the map. He has several maps now, each showing different things. Food, liquids, other supplies, interesting landmarks (Klaus insisted), spots of instability....

However, this map is larger, showing the entire state. Five marks out a route from where he is - going east would lead him towards *more* cities, but going west would have him encounter larger cities earlier. And despite the security that can only come from having a ghostly scout on your side, Five is loathe to go too far from home just yet.

He'll get the chance, though. Five tries not to feel bitter about that, and mostly fails. Klaus hasn't asked how the equations are coming along, and Five isn't sure whether that's because he isn't interested or because he knows they….*aren't.*

Oh, Five is making progress. But it's slow, agonizingly so. Five might just reach Klaus' age before he manages to crack it. It's something he's not sure how to deal with, the prospect of spending longer than he's been alive so far in this goddamned wasteland of a world. Growing old, older than his siblings ever got to be.

Five bites back a sigh, and looks over the map. The route will take them near the coast, and Five toys with the idea of sending Klaus over to explore Europe. He discards it. Not because it's impractical, but because they don't know if Klaus has to walk everywhere or if there's some faster way he can get around they haven't discovered yet. Five can't teleport across *oceans* - even a few blocks is stretching it, and that's when he's fresh - but maybe Klaus can move his ghostly ass around in some similar manner. If so, it would be ridiculous to send him walking across the Atlantic when he might be able to blink across in a few years.

Honestly, if Five weren't so stressed about figuring out how to time-travel, he might develop a complex about the way Klaus is so insanely suited to living in the apocalypse (well, 'living').

Speaking of Klaus -

"What'cha doin'?" he asks, poking his head over Five's shoulder. Five doesn't twitch, even though anyone would have sworn he was alone in the room a second ago. It took several months, but he's grown inured to Klaus popping into existence at random times in random

places (Five does his best to ignore the times when he *wasn't* inured, but he has a feeling that's doomed to failure, considering how often Klaus brings it up).

"Planning our route to explore a few places over summer," Five answers, and marks another leg of the journey. He glances at Klaus. "Nice dress," he says.

"We're going on a *road trip?*" Klaus sounds absolutely delighted. "And *danke,* I picked it specially."

Five gnaws on the end of his pen. "It's not a road trip," he corrects absently. Then he blinks, and looks at Klaus. "Can you even drive?"

"Ha! No," Klaus grins. "Never even bothered trying. You kinda have to be able to tell whether the people on the street are living or dead to have any hope of being let behind the wheel. Why, are you going to hotwire something? Channel your inner Mad Max?"

Five ignores what is probably an inane pop culture reference and frowns at the map. "....I'm not sure," he says slowly. "On one hand, a car would cut down on a *lot* of travel time. On the other hand, I'm not a mechanic, fuel would be tricky, and there's a high chance of an accident. I'll have to think it over."

"Suit yourself," Klaus shrugs, which is more of a full-body shake than anything else. "When are we leaving?"

"I was thinking May. We'd come back around mid-September."

Klaus whistles. "Four and a half months? What are we doing, looking for El Dorado?"

"No," Five says, even though he has no idea what that is. "Just - scouting. Assessing the damage. We can scavenge anywhere, so I'll only have to bring enough food to reach the next city, that's a bonus, and -"

Five talks for a bit about the route, and points out the various goals he hopes to accomplish. See how far the devastation extends, check if the method of death is the same for everyone (although the evidence will be over a year old, people randomly dead in places without anything around to kill them should be simple enough to spot), get an estimate of the supplies he's going to have to plunder *someday,* maybe find a few textbooks that would be helpful, search for habitable locations….

"You're *moving?*" Klaus sounds startled.

Five twitches. "I'm….not *now,* of course. But I need to keep my options open. The supplies in this city won't last forever, and in that case it'll just be easier to move."

"Huh," Klaus says. He's clearly never considered the idea, and looks at the map like it's the first time he's seeing it, uneasily.

Five isn't entirely comfortable with it himself (his *siblings* are here), but it's the logical choice. He can't - he can't remain tied to this place forever, not if it impacts his survival.

And Klaus will be there. Wherever he goes, at least one of his siblings will always be right there with him, and….Five thinks he can do it, if he thinks about it like that. Klaus promised, after all.

Five shakes himself. “Come on,” he says to Klaus. “We should probably get going before it’s too dark.”

“Right,” Klaus says, tearing his attention form the map. He looks uncharacteristically subdued when he says, “Lead the way.”

Five puts away the map, and does so.

**********

Klaus isn’t visible on the way there. He’s closing in on fifty minutes a day now, but until he can hold it for at least three hours he isn’t allowed to waste it. Five knows he’s not alone as he walks through the rubble, but damn it if he doesn’t have to remind himself of that every few minutes.

Delores is back at the base, understanding that this is a private matter. Five doesn’t know what he would do without Delores. Klaus has admitted that they talk sometimes, and he likes her just as Five does.

It’s a strange little family - a teleporting teenager, the ghost of a junkie, and the top half of a mannequin, all together at the end of the world. Klaus has said that it would make a great sitcom.

Five kicks a bit of rubble, and glances at the sky. About an hour of daylight left. Plenty of time.

He wonders what the world thought of Vanya’s book. If they used to watch the Umbrella Academy like they were a television show, distant and unreal and perfection incarnate, only to have it all crashing down when Vanya did the unthinkable and told everyone about the cracks in the foundation.

It’s skewed, certainly. Vicious, in parts. More revealing than he’d want it to be, even when he knew going in that was probably the case. But Five can’t help but think it *needed* to be written, that people needed to find out that the Umbrella Academy wasn’t perfect, wasn’t okay, was as horribly, rawly real as it could get.

That even despite that, they were still a family, once.

Five slows to a stop.

He feels more than sees Klaus become visible, standing still and quiet behind him. Five never thought Klaus could be either of those things, but this past year has shown him a lot about Klaus he never thought about before.

Five clears his throat, and for the first time in a year, speaks to someone - someones - who aren’t Klaus or Delores.

“Hey,” he says to his siblings’ graves. “I - I haven’t come by lately. Sorry.”

The wind blows gently, waving the tattered cloth on the poles he used to mark the places. He rummaged through the ruins of the Academy for the clothing, now nearly unrecognizable. Three months before Klaus appeared, he made two more markers for Vanya and Ben, although now he knows he’ll never find either.

“Winter happened,” Five adds. “And I couldn’t go outside - well, Klaus made me, but only around the library. And then - I found your book, Vanya.”

Digging the graves was the hard part. He was never the strongest of even his non-Luther siblings, his fighting style more based around speed and agility, and that translated badly to digging holes in the ground. As a result, the graves are far more shallow than they should be.

In theory, he’d do anything for his siblings. In practice, he can’t even give them a decent burial.

“It was pretty good,” he tells her. “Thanks for - for telling people how smart I am.”

Even if that was one of the skewed parts. If Five was actually smart, he wouldn’t have run off into the apocalypse, left his family behind, and not realized he couldn’t get back. If he was smart, he would have stayed. He should have stayed.

Five hears a quiet huff of laughter behind him, but it sounds pained. He blinks. There seems to be something wrong with his vision.

“I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you guys before,” he says. “Not even once. I -” There’s a sudden obstruction in Five’s throat, and he has to swallow several times before it goes away. “I didn’t - I didn’t want to, because if I had, then it - it would have been real.”

Realer than the rocks and ruins, realer than the canned food and cockroaches, realer than the fires and winds and ash and storms. More real than the apocalypse - it would have been the end of the world.

He has to face it sometime.

“But it’s been a year,” he says, the landscape blurring and shifting in front of him, “and I’m going to be here for - a lot more of those, so. I - I miss you.” He blinks. “I love you.”

Then there are arms around him, pulling him into his brother’s chest, and Five’s legs give out from under him and he cries. Not loud wailing, but jagged, broken sobs that barely make any sound except for the gasping when he breathes. The kind of crying he’s refused to do for a year now, the kind he’s never done before.

The kind that says goodbye.

# Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

And here it is: the final chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Klaus holds Five as he cries and doesn't pay any attention to the sharp, tearing sensation that spreads throughout his body the longer he's corporeal. He's pretty sure he won't be able to fully manifest for at least a week after this, but it's worth it. He wouldn't let go if Ben himself showed up and asked.

It's some time later when Five stops crying, and just hangs limply in Klaus' arms. At least, when Klaus checks, he is. Klaus kind of can't feel anything anymore, except for maybe a faint tingling in the tips of his fingers. He's not sure how long it's been, and he's not sure how much longer he can hold out without losing coherence.

Klaus is furiously debating with himself whether he should mention this to Five, or keep holding him and risk not being able to appear for the next however-long, when Five solves the problem for him. He sniffles, quietly, and extricates himself from Klaus' embrace. Klaus hesitates, but lets go of being corporeal and bites back a sigh of relief at the lessened burden. Even then, he has to fight to just stay visible, and he knows he must be flickering every few seconds.

Five looks at him and a pained expression crosses his face. "S-"

"If you say sorry," Klaus says, and fuck it even hurts to speak, but he's sure as hell not letting that show, "I will use up even more of my energy to punch you in the face."

And Five even smiles at that, if you can call it a smile when the rest of his face is tearstained and blotchy and he sort of looks like he wants to cry again. Klaus decides to count it, because god, it's not like they're getting a better one today, of all days.

"Okay," Five says. "Okay."

Klaus smiles back at him. It's not up to his usual standards, but he thinks he can make an exception for today. It's the anniversary of his death, he's pretty sure that has to count for something.

"We should probably head back," Five says, after another few moments, but he doesn't make any move to stand.

Klaus nods, in lieu of trying to speak again, but also doesn't make any other movement.

The sun is nearly halfway below the horizon by now. The dying light sends spears of color through the clouds, turning the sky into a brilliant canvas of reds and purples and oranges. It's honestly one of the most beautiful things Klaus has ever seen.

He's not sure how to feel about that.

The graves stand as they have for the past year - solid and tall and so very, very fragile. Klaus looks at the marker where his own body is buried, then at Ben's next to it.

Why is his throat closing up when neither of them are actually there?

Klaus finds it hard to look at the other graves. As much as he was distanced from them, as much as he got so tired of them deciding that their bullshit was more important than his bullshit, as much as he really couldn't stand the sight of them at times - they were his family. That meant something, no matter that Dad thought it was just lip service.

"Hey, Five?" he says.

"Yeah?"

"When you go back -" Klaus bites his lip. "You should get me sober."

Five turns to face him, and damn, staying visible is getting kind of hard now. "What?"

"Little me really isn't going to like it," Klaus huffs out a faint laugh, because that's an understatement, "but he really needs it."

"Uh, okay," Five says, frowning. "But why not tell him yourself?"

Klaus blinks at him, and loses his grip on visibility for several seconds.

"Huh?" he says, when he can force himself back onto the physical plane.

"Klaus," and Five is blinking very rapidly now. "Klaus, I'm going to bring us both back. You - you knew that, right?"

"Uh," Klaus says. "No? Why?"

Five looks stricken. His hands ball into fists, but that doesn't stop their shaking. "Because - you - I'm not *leaving* you here!"

"...But if you're changing the timeline, I won't actually exist," Klaus says slowly.

It's not that he hasn't thought about it. He's made his peace with the fact that by undoing the apocalypse, Five would be ensuring that Klaus-the-ghost never existed, and Klaus will forget all about this. He'll only exist in Five's memories, and even if that's kind of a bummer, Klaus is okay with that if it means the rest of his siblings can come back to life and the world gets saved. That's some action-movie heroics right there, and for the majority of his life Klaus has known that his death wouldn't be worth spit. The idea of fading away in exchange for setting the world right is honestly pretty alright in Klaus' book.

Except Five is looking at him like he just said he's going to reenact the apocalypse all over again. "Yes, that's why I'm bringing you back with me!"

"...You lost me," Klaus admits, and he knows he's glitching like a bad cable channel but this is clearly important to Five, and honestly Klaus would also really like to know what assumptions Five has been operating under for the past six months(?) because apparently they're the complete opposite of his own.

Five is - oh fuck, he's crying again, damnit Klaus did not mean to do that. Five grits his teeth and leans forward and god, he looks *desperate,* Klaus can count on one hand with fingers left over how many times he's seen Five looking like that, and then he says, with no room for doubt, "I'm taking you with me. We're going *together.* You - you promised me, so I promise you, I'm not leaving you. Okay?"

Klaus can't speak, and not just because he's pretty sure he genuinely can't manage it. There's a feeling inside his chest, where it went numb several minutes ago, and he thinks it might be warmth.

He nods, mutely, and feels it as he finally can't hold himself together any longer. Five doesn't look away from him, though, and Klaus doesn't even stop the tears when they start.

"Okay," Klaus says out loud, and even if Five can't hear it, he feels like a ten-million pound weight just fell off him. "Okay."

He's going back. He's not going to be erased. Five isn't going to leave.

Klaus finds he's pretty alright with that.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap! Honestly, I was very surprised that everyone thought Five would abandon Klaus. We're talking about the boy who spent nearly three and a half times as long as he even *knew* his siblings trying to save them, there's no way he'd leave Klaus behind when they've had a bunch of Quality Bonding Time.

Stay tuned for the sequel! I have a good chunk of it written already, along with an interquel oneshot that I'll be posting in about a week to tide you over.

Please tell me what you think! I want to hear it all! And thank you for all of your support throughout this entire story, it means the world to me!

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